THE CHRISTMAS CAT

BY

ANNA BURNHAM BRYANT

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"On the rug in front of one of the low bookcases stood Joey with his pet."

The Christmas Cat

By

ANNA BURNHAM BRYANT

Illustrated by

EDITH BROWNING BRAND

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TO LEE

AND

DOROTHY

AND

LITTLE KITTY SKYE

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THE BLACK SILK BAG

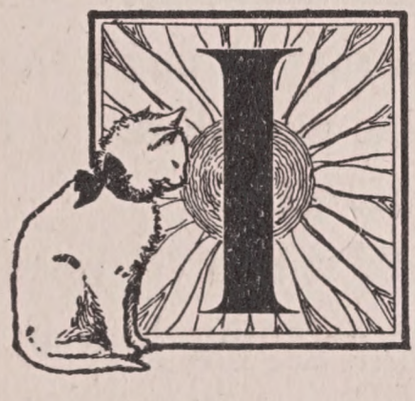
AND

WHAT WAS IN IT

The Christmas Cat

CHAPTER I

The Black Silk Bag and What was in It



"I SOR it! I sor it! It 's all done but the puckering-string! Now what *do* you suppose she 'll put in it?"

Polly had been "peeking." If Grandma Plummer had caught a glimpse of that little blue eye at the keyhole, there never would have been anything at all in the little black silk bag, nor any puckering-string to draw it up by, — that is, if she had kept her promises. She hated peeking.

"Last time it was pop-corn — pink sugar — and it lasted till the train got

clear home," said Wally, sucking a sugar "mint" that grandma had given him. "And time before that it was shellbarks. She won't ever tell us, but you can *feel*, you know, and kind of scrunch the bag up in your hands, and guess what 's in it."

THE BLACK SILK BAG

"You 'll do pretty well, my dear young friend, *not* to 'scrunch' *this* one!" remarked Cousin Jack, passing through the room on his way to the woodshed. "I guess there 'd be a yowling!"

"O Cousin Jack! *would* it hurt?" cried both the children at once, catching him by the jacket-flaps to hold him. "Is it prickery things? Do you truly know anything?"

"Lots," said Jack, squirming to get away, and shaking himself loose at last from their clinging fingers. "And it 's *awful* prickery. My! won't you be sorry grandmother did n't keep her old bag at home this year!"

Every year at Christmas time the two children made grandma a long visit. Mother always came with them, and sometimes she stayed all the time, and sometimes it was only a day or two; and then she came again to take them home. Father could not often spare her all through the Christmas holidays.

AND WHAT WAS IN IT

But this time she was not going to be able to come at all, so she had written that the children were to be put in charge of a conductor, and take the long hundred-mile journey all alone. It was a thing to be prayed over, but not worried over; so when mamma had decided that there was really no other way to do, she wrote a cheerful letter telling them what train they were to take, and when she would meet them, and filled up the rest of the letter with love and kisses.

"She never said once to be careful!" said Wally, wonderingly.

"Nor she did n't say we must be good," added Polly, who, of the two, was the least likely to need that warning.

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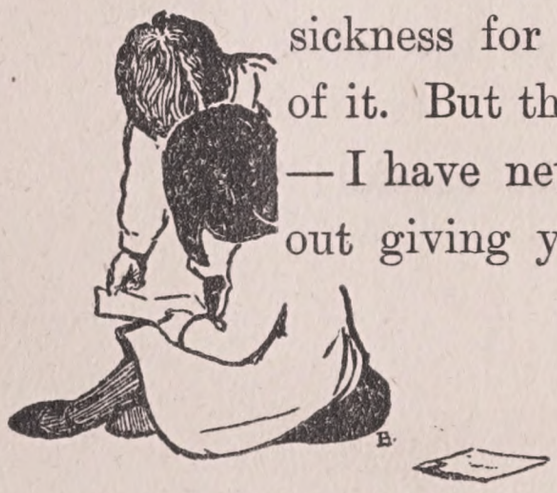
They both scanned the letter carefully, but not a word of warning or worry!

"For all that, she must have meant it," said Wally, sweetly, pushing a little sticky face up close to Polly's. "And we will, won't we, Polly?"

Polly did n't say whether she would or she would n't. She did n't like to promise too much beforehand. The door opened and in walked grandma.

"No, dears," she said, decidedly, as the children swarmed all over her, trying to look into the bag, "no candy this time. You 've done nothing but eat candy for the last fortnight, and I won't risk a fit of sickness for you by giving you any more of it. But there 'll be something in the bag — I have never let you go home yet without giving you a bagful of something."



"And it will be something good to eat!" begged Wally. "Say it will, for you get so tarrible hungry on car-trains, and kind of — homesick in your stomach. Do n't you know, grandma?"

AND WHAT WAS IN IT

"Yes, I know!" she laughed, going to the pantry and fetching out a big plate of scalloped cookies and hole-y doughnuts. She had a very good memory, and knew just about how often that kind of "home-sickness" needed the doctor, and exactly what pills and powders were good for it. "No, I do n't believe I would try to eat what you 'll find in the bag this time. It might not agree with you."

"Train for Ware — North Ware, South Ware, East Ware, *every*where!" cried Uncle John, cheerily, cracking his ox-whip as he came in at the door like a big six-foot snowdrift with a round, red face set a-top that looked very jolly and Santa Claus-y in its fringe of icicle-whiskers.

THE BLACK SILK BAG

"Anybody that goes out to-day must be bundled up in a featherbed. It 's middlin' cold weather, marm, and breezy."

"Now, John, it 's *too* cold to take such little creeturs out in!" said grandma. "You just let me take their things right off, and I 'll sit down and write 'Tildy just how it was. She 's their mother, and she would n't want I should send 'em home frozen stiff, and having the snuffles, any more than anything. Polly, child, you" —

"No, you won't write anything nor take off anything, either," said Uncle John, good-naturedly. "You do n't expect April weather in the midst of January. *They* do n't mind a little wind blowing. Bless your heart, I 've carried barrels and barrels o' turnips and squashes and potatoes to market, right out the cellar, any amount worse weather than this is. 'T won't hurt 'em a mite — not a mite ; but fix 'em warm for a pung-ride."

"Who 's talking about vegetables?" retorted grandma. "Did n't know 's you classed your nephews and nieces in with garden-sass!"

AND WHAT WAS IN IT

This made Uncle John laugh. He always liked to have the little old lady "answer him up spunky," as he called it.

"Not half so 'sassy' as their grandmother," he called back over his shoulder, as he started out to look after his team while the passengers were getting ready. "And a barrel o' girls won't freeze any sooner than a barrel o' turnips."

"What 's that crazy boy got in his head now!" murmured grandma, tying Wally's red yarn muffler tighter than was comfortable, and bringing out a piece of an old log-cabin quilt to wrap round Polly's feet in the "pung," and lastly pulling over Polly's rosy little face an immense green "pumpkin" hood as big as a coal-scuttle. Polly laughed and laughed, but her voice

THE BLACK SILK BAG

sounded as if it were laughing in a well, and she could n't see any way but straight ahead of her, or hear a word unless you stood exactly in front of her. Grandma was so busy tucking and tying and patting and poking her that she never thought to look out of the window, or she might have wondered more than ever at the doings of that "boy," as she was fond of calling her forty-year-old son when he would n't listen to her.

But Wally had got "fixed" at last and gone to the window, and he gave such a shout that even Polly heard, 'way back in her hood, and called to know what it was.

"Is *that* what we 're going to ride in?" said Wally, pointing with his finger at a sort of low, square-sided box set on runners and filled with barrels. They were set snugly side by side so that there was no room for any of them to tip over or "joggle" much, and all the spaces and cracks between were filled and stuffed in with hay.

"I s'pose he thinks the oxes will want some when he gets there," said Polly, who had come to Wally's side, "but 'course the barrels will be tooken out and make some room for us to sit in it first. That's the way we always do," she added, for she had had ox-rides before and knew how soft and warm hay is to nestle in.

AND WHAT WAS IN IT

"No, he won't," said Cousin Jack, joining them, and beginning to pick up their bags and bundles. These were all to be tied together and packed away in the baggage car, all except one, the little black silk bag which grandma kept ready to put into Polly's hand at the very last possible minute, with all the warnings to be good and never be careless or bad that mamma had left out of her letter. "No, he won't, and you 'll find out the reason why, my lady, in a minute, when I get you out there — pickaback — and drop you into the top of one of those tall barrels, right into a

soft, warm nest of hay where you can curl up and go to sleep and be as warm as the pussy-cat here in the basket."

THE BLACK SILK BAG

"You do n't mean it!" cried grandma, lifting up both her hands.

"Sure as preaching!" answered Cousin Jack, picking up the first child that came handy and running clumsily out through the snow-drift to do as he said he would, then running back for the other.

"Is n't that nice?" asked Uncle John, coming to look over the edge of the barrel, while Polly looked up out of her hood to see the big red face with its icicle-whiskers. "Is n't it warm? Can you feel the wind any? That 's right — curl right down like a little kitten and snooze it out. I declare, I 'm just proud o' myself for thinking o' such a cute, comfortable way to carry ye! An' the boy here, he 's as well off as you are. And now — what 's that, marm? — a bag for Polly? Oh, yes, I see! Here you

are, little one; big bag, little bag, bandbox and bundle. Come up, Starbright! Wh' *hish*, Spot, you rascal! Gee, there! Gee, I tell ye! Wh' *hish!*"

AND WHAT WAS IN IT

Down in the warm, safe barrel, Polly listened with delight to the "queer ox-en-language," as she called her uncle's remarks to his slow, sure-footed team. She felt the zigzag, swaying course of the creaking runners, and wished she were only tall enough to stand up in her barrel and see what a wonderful white world she was going through. She knew just how the wide cedar branches, heavy with snow, reached out over the road on each side as they passed; she guessed how the little striped squirrels were running up and down the tree-trunks, and most likely there were partridges — she had seen some once when they were out looking for a Christmas tree to cut. She did not know how the wind was blowing out there, or how cold Uncle

THE BLACK SILK BAG

John's toes and fingers were, or how nipped and red his nose was. She could not even hear him thrashing his arms to keep warm, for you remember that besides being in a barrel, she had on a pumpkin hood.

Pretty soon she began to wonder about that little bag in her lap, almost buried up in the buffalo robe that had been the last thing tucked round her. It was something very warm, that was sure. Perhaps it was a cake wrapped up in newspaper, or hot doughnuts. They were nice for the hands, and you could eat them afterwards. But it didn't *feel* like cake or doughnuts; and besides, grandma had advised her not to eat it. What could it be? Even through her thick red mittens she could feel something soft and squirmy — something that was not round like doughnuts or long like a loaf of cake, or *any* shape that you could really call a shape. It was — something — *alive! What was it?*

All at once she gave a little scream. This cake or doughnut, or whatever it was, had pins in it, and they stuck into her fingers right through her mittens, when she put her hand into the bag to try to find out what in the world she had there.

AND WHAT WAS IN IT

"What is it, Polly?" cried Wally from his barrel. He had n't any hood over his ears, and he had pushed off the muffler.

"It 's a cat!" squealed Polly, not hearing a word. "I do believe it is a cat. There is n't any other kind of a thing that can say *Me-ow!* And there is n't anything else that has pins in its claws. Oh, come out here — just a little bit of a way out, so I can see if you are a cat, and what you look like! Oh, are n't you just *dear!*" she cried, catching a glimpse of two little white, pink-lined ears and two round, dark-blue eyes and a moist little pink nose with a funny three-cornered mouth just under it. That was all she dared to look in to

see, but that was enough. It certainly was a cat!

THE BLACK SILK BAG

Do any of you little girls (or boys, either) remember the first time you ever had a little live pet of your own to love and care for — something that needed you, that you must not forget to feed, that you must learn how to be good to, that could look in your eyes and answer back when you are kind and loving to it? It is the sweet, tender, *mother*-feeling that makes you love it so, and I would not give much for a boy or girl who has never felt it. When Polly saw the gleam of those two little bright eyes at the bag's mouth, her heart gave a great leap of joy, for never before in her whole long nine-year-old life had she owned a kitty. She forgot to wonder any more about the squirrels or the partridges; she gave up trying to stretch her head up to see the snowy cedar-branches as they overarched the slow-

moving team and shook a merry sprinkle down now and then into the open tops of the barrels. She just hugged her little black bag with the white kitty in it, and talked loving mother-words to it all the rest of the way to the station.

AND WHAT WAS IN IT

When at last they stopped, Uncle John came and looked into the top of the barrels again; but nobody looked up at him, for they were all three fast asleep — Wally and Polly and the little white cat.

KITTY'S VOYAGE IN THE CELLAR

CHAPTER II

Kitty's Voyage in the Cellar

ATS have to be 'wonted,' first thing you have to do with 'em," said good-natured, red-armed Mandy, dropping her work in the middle to go and set down a saucer of milk for the new kitty. "That long story you 're telling can wait a minute, but the cat can't. I 've heard people say you ought to butter their feet once or twice and then they never 'll think o' straying off anywheres, but I guess feeding will do without that, and butter 's high this winter, your ma says."

KITTY'S VOYAGE

Wally, who was a bit of a telltale, ran off to his mother to tell her how Mandy was going to butter the cat and said she ought to be *sha'n'ted;* but mother only laughed at him and sent him back to the kitchen where Polly and Mandy were still making a business of seeing the cat eat. Polly was also telling the rest of the story about the barrel-ride and their trip on the cars with both their tickets stuck in the conductor's hatband, so that he had to take off his hat respectfully every time he punched *their* tickets. He always forgot and said, "Tickets, please!" in that sharp, clicky way conductors have, and then he had to laugh because the children laughed to see him saying "please" to himself. He insisted that the cat ought to have a ticket, too, and finally gave them one for her, "on trust," as he said, and saw that it was duly punched at every station.

I am writing all this in the way Polly

told it. She had talked to everybody every minute since her father had met them at the station. He was glad to get them back again and never heard a word the children said, first, last or middle; but other people were beginning to wish they would stop long enough to breathe or eat their supper or something. Mother had already begun to throw out little mild hints, such as asking Polly why it was that people were born with two ears and only one mouth. But Polly was n't good at taking hints. She said that she did n't know, unless it was so that things could go in at one ear and out at the other, using one of grandma's funny phrases that had happened to stick in her memory. Father laughed and said, "That disposes of *you*, mother! It 's the principle I act on," and after that they let the child alone.

"Let her talk it out," he advised, kindly. "She never can go to bed and

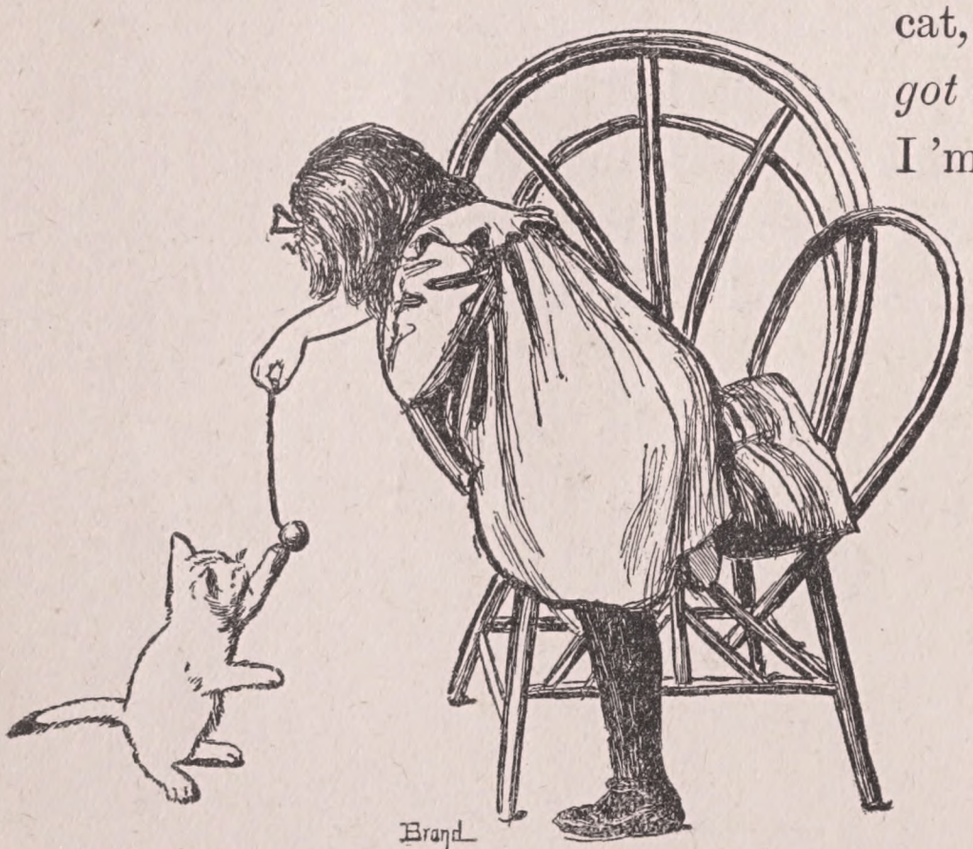
KITTY'S VOYAGE

to sleep with all that bubbling up inside of her."

The next day was rainy, and the next and the next. Polly had plenty of time to get used to having a cat, or, as Mandy said, "to let the new wear off." After a while she began to go back to her dolls a little, and her new plaything had a little chance to sleep and grow, which it certainly had n't when Polly was around petting it.

"Is n't it just cute?" cried Polly, dangling a soft ball by a string so that the furry white paws could catch it. "I 'clare, baby cat, you have truly *got* to have a name. I 'm tired of saying 'it' to you."

"Well, I should say 't was about time myself, if



you was ever going to have any," said Mandy. "I knew a man once that his folks would n't name him, because they could n't quite settle on any name that was good enough, and so they said they would let him get old enough to name himself, and then there would be one pleased, anyway. But he was n't, for when he got that old, everybody had kind of taken to calling him 'Bub,' and they never dropped it to the day of his death. 'Bub' Long he lived and died, and that was when he was about eighty."

"I might call him Winky," said Polly, thoughtfully, more or less troubled by Mandy's story. "He winks so, whatever you say to him, instead of talking. I should n't like my cat to grow up to be eighty, and not any name to him."

"Winky is a good name," said Mandy. "Easy to say, and that 's the main thing."

"It 's Winky, then," said Polly, and

KITTY'S VOYAGE

Winky it was till he got his doctor's degree, — but that belongs in another chapter.

It rained, and it rained, and it rained. The no-school bell rang almost every day that week, for the streets were rivers, and even the street-cars were stopped every now and then by gullying "washouts." The fathers and mothers said that it was n't fit for any child to go to school. For all that, four or five days of steady downpour made them feel that a little outdoor air would be good for their darlings, and many a happy boy and even a few girls could be seen along the streaming gutters, floating chip-fleets or making dams against the swift brown current.

"You 're looking after your kitty, of course, Polly?" said mother, looking up from her sewing one long, dreary afternoon, and Polly mumbled something by way of answer that mother took for "Yes 'm," and

so went on with her work satisfied. If Polly's mouth had n't been so full of pins and strings and other conveniences for doll's dressmaking, her mother would have understood what she did say, which was that she guessed the little scamp was all safe enough around the house somewhere. That happened to be true, but not *their* house, and no thanks to Polly's oversight.

"Tell Mandy to ring the bell for Wally to come in now," said mother at last, as it began to grow near night. "He must get on dry clothes and get good and warm before bedtime."

Mandy brought his little low chair and set it in front of the grate, and then mother had him stay and toast himself till he began seriously to question whether 't were better for a boy to suffer as much as this for the fun of playing out in the rain for half an hour.

"Lemme have your little kitty, Polly?"

KITTY'S VOYAGE

he whined, at last, tired of sitting there doing nothing, for mamma would n't even let him read, with that blaze in his eyes.

"All right," said Polly, obligingly, going to fetch her pet.

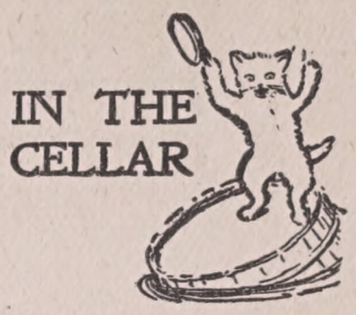
They heard her calling him in various tones of entreaty all over the house.

"Kitty, kitty! Winky, Winky! Kitty-winky-winky-winky! Why, I can't find my kitty anywhere! Who 's seen Winky? Oh, I did n't butter his feet, and now I 've lost him! Oh, who 's seen my kitty?"

Polly's wails soon brought the family to the rescue, and everybody began asking questions and nobody answering them, till by and by somebody happened to hear Wally say, drawlingly, "Maybe 't was your cat we was a-poking!"

Polly turned on him fiercely, and mother with surprised reproach, but he was looking down at his stocking-feet, and seemed to be thinking deeply.

"We was n't hurting any cat!" he said, indignantly, shaking off Polly's strong young fingers which were fairly clawing his arm and shoulder in her anxiety to get the truth out of him, — "only just having some fun with 'em, cause cats do n't like to get their feet wet, and it 's fun to set 'em sailin'. It was getting dark out there, and we could n't see 't was your cat or whose 't was. 'T was lots o' fun, till all at once it *scooted* — right through a suller winder, I guess, 'cause we heard some glass go smash."



"You cruel, cruel boy!" said mamma in a low, grieved voice, with a look in her soft brown eyes that was worse than whippings.

As for Polly, she was too angry to speak, too sorrowful to cry, and too bewildered to think of any way to help matters. Mandy, however, had her wits about her, and snatching up her hood and

KITTY'S VOYAGE

waterproof, she ran quickly around the neighborhood asking everywhere if anybody had seen "our kitty," and would they look in the cellar, please, for maybe it might have gone in there.

"You may come look in my cellar and wade in it, if you want to," said Mrs. McGillis, hospitably. "The water has come in that deep, you could use it for a cistern. There 's no cat here, and unless they get hungry for water, it 's the last place they 'll be coming to."

It was the same story all through the street. Mrs. Allison, in the big white house opposite, felt very sorry and offered to take a light and go hunting through the premises.

"Little kittens often stray away, I know," she said, gently, "and I should be so sorry for little Polly Plummer to lose her pet. Kitty, kitty, kitty! Do you think she would know your voice any

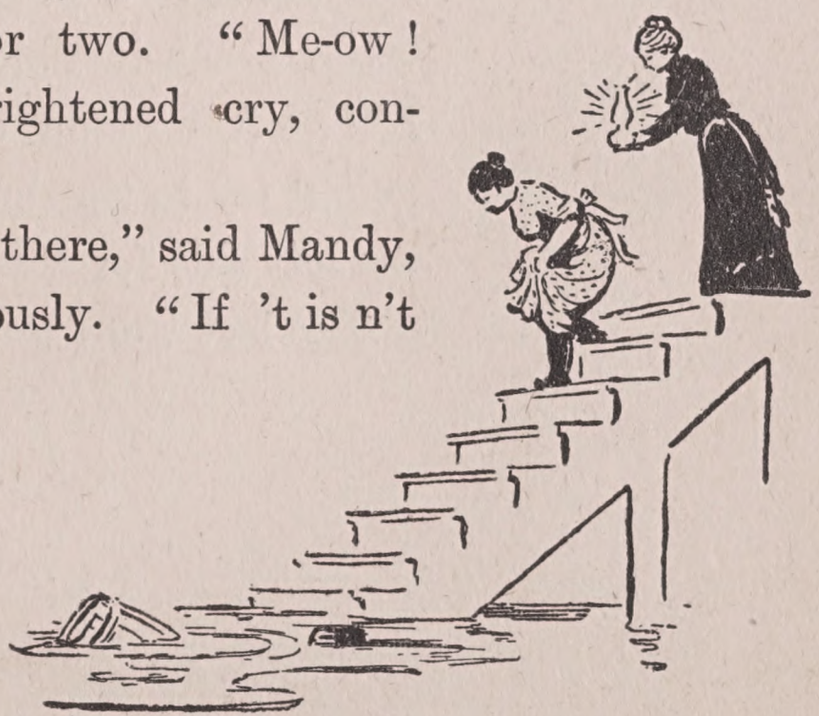
better? Try. No, it is hardly worth while to look down there," she said, half opening the cellar door as they passed. "The water has been steadily rising all day, until it has put the furnace fire out. Mr. Allison said this morning that it was nearly up to the lower dampers, and everything is afloat down there. He is out now trying to arrange some outlet, I believe. Meanwhile, we are huddling around the grates and fireplaces. No, there is no chance to find your — hark! what 's that? Did you hear anything?"

IN THE CELLAR

"Mew! me-ow! *me-ow-ow!*" came pitifully and clearly up the dark stairway.

"There 's *some*thing alive down there!" said Mandy, gathering up her skirts and going down a stair or two. "Me-ow! *me-ow!*" came the frightened cry, continually.

"I 'm a-going down there," said Mandy, feeling her way cautiously. "If 't is n't



KITTY'S VOYAGE

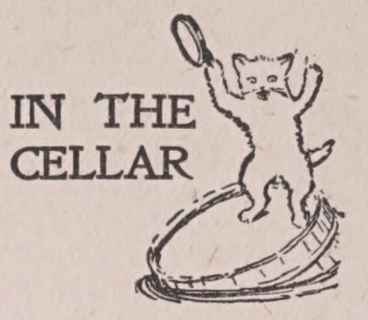
our cat, it 's some cat, and I ain't one to let a fellow creetur suffer. Hold that light one mite lower, Mis' Allison, and I guess — ow! that water 's cold!"

Mandy had stepped one stair too low, and splashed into the icy water, but try as she would, she could not fix the direction of that babyish crying which never stopped for one instant but grew louder and more appealing as there seemed to be a chance of rescue. It seemed to come from everywhere, the water and the walls giving back queer, misleading echoes.

"Most likely it 's on some window-ledge or other," said Mandy, "and I 've got to get to it. Oh, pshaw, you need n't mind me wading. I 'm five foot three, and this water 's consider'ble less than half that. I 'll go feel round the inside sills there, if you 'll try to tip that light a little more to the left side for me — *OW!*"

The last word was from Mandy, and not

the cat, though you might think differently. As she was about to put one venturous foot in unknown waters, an overturned butter-keg went floating by, and kitty, glad to forsake so small a raft, took one flying leap from it to Mandy's shoulder. A cat's eyes could see where Mandy's could n't, and thanks to that fact, the girl was spared a rather disagreeable exploring tour around the cellar. By some wonderful good luck, that first frightened leap through the window had landed him on some one of the many floating boxes and tubs and barrels which were bobbing around in the water, and his first voyage had not quite ended in shipwreck.



IN THE CELLAR

Mandy hugged the poor, frightened little thing close to her breast, as she stumbled up-stairs and hurried over home to calm the fears of its more frightened family. Wally was forgiven — with conditions. The little mean streak in him that had led

KITTY'S VOYAGE

him to find fun in any creature's unhappiness was more than his mother would stand, and she gave him to understand it plainly.

And Winky — happy Winky! — he cuddled down in his safe, cosy basket, and curled himself into a fluffy ball of content, purring as if he were trying to purr down the noises of the storm which still rattled at the windows.

HOW WINKY HELPED IN THE DOLLS' DRESSMAKING

CHAPTER III

How Winky Helped in the Dolls' Dressmaking

WINKY!"

It was as much as the thirteenth time that Polly had made that little remark. This time she caught the little rascal by what she called "the nack of his neck," and ran to the window as if she were going to let him find out the soft feel of a snowbank. Then she repented, and began to give him what she called "a talking-to." This is the way it sounded: —

"You dear little mizzable *thing*, you! You bad, naughty kitty-boy! Can't you see your mother trying to make dolly-clothes for her whole great big raggedy

fam'ly, and here you are plaguing and bothering and sticking your nose, and your toes, and your paws, and your claws, into every single thing you should n't ought to!"

HOW WINKY HELPED

Winky only rolled over on his back, and took Polly's best celluloid doll in his four fluffy paws and tried to bite the head off. That was the last straw. Polly and Susie, and even tender-hearted little Dorothy, all declared that they could not carry on a Dolls' Dressmaking Establishment with such a four-footed hinderer about, so they opened the door and shut him out in the hall, where for a time he mewed and whined pitifully to get back into the dining-room with its beautiful long table strewn with lovely bright-colored rags and other things to make a cat happy. No use. The girls were hard of heart. Not a step should he come again inside that door.

You notice that Polly was having company. That means that they were all in the big dining-room with a big notice pasted up on the door to let everybody know that here was the place to come for your fashionable dressmaking. Susie was older than the other girls, so she was the cutter and fitter; little Dorothy was the 'prentice-girl, and they made her pick up all the rags and pull out basting-threads. As for Polly, she was the "New York buyer" for the "house," and the trips she made to the attic, and the bargains she made with her mother and Mandy in respect to the best parts of old clothes and unused pieces of new ones, would be worth telling about if I were not in such a hurry to get at Winky's part of this chapter.

"It 's time we begun on our summer work," said Polly, with a sudden dissatisfied look at the piles of bright flannels

and cashmeres that had been the fruit of her last excursion.

"Yes," said Dorothy, who was the littlest and liked big words. "I think we are *es-tremely* behind-our-hand with the work vis season."

"It 's shif'less," said Polly, who took a good many of her phrases from Mandy, "just shif'less, not to get ahead and keep ahead, and I 'm going to bundle all these things into the rag-bag, and hunt around to see if I can't find some muslins and laces more suitabler to hot weather. Here 't is most the first day of March, and next month is April, and then comes May and June — half the summer gone and nothing done yet!"

"Ask your mother," said Susie, who had very little idea of any difficulty that Polly's mother could not help her out of.

Polly started for her mother's room, which was at the head of the stairs, but

drew her head back with a jerk, and such a quick red flush on her little round face that the girls both dropped their work, and cried out, "What is it?"

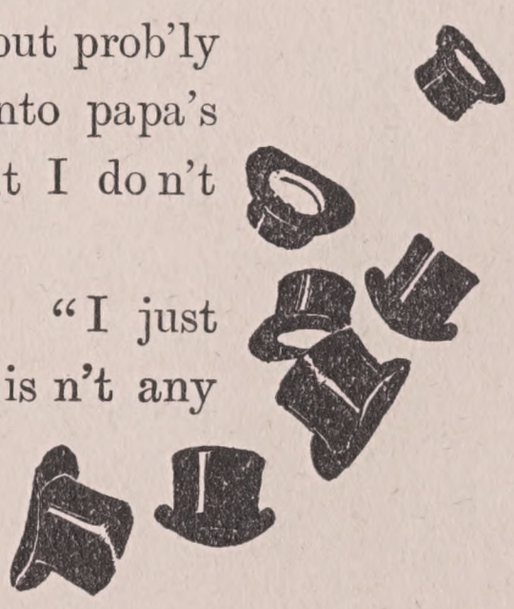
"I d' know!" said Polly, still with that red, frightened look on her face. "I — *think* it 's a 'mittee-meeting!"

"Out in the hall?" cried Susie.

"There is n't anything but stairs to sit on," said Dorothy. "They must look funny!"

"It 's their hats," half-whispered Polly, — "their tall hats, you know, like what your papa wears Sundays. There 's a whole row of 'em, and they 're all piled up on the table under the hat-rack. Of course there 's some men to 'em, but prob'ly most likely they 've all gone into papa's study to have a 'scussion. But I do n't dast to go out there."

"Ho, fraid-cat!" said Dotty. "I just as lief as wink my eye. Only 't is n't any



use of me going. It 's you that 's going to ask your mother. Can't you go up the back stairs or something?"

"I s'pose so," said Polly, doubtfully, "only Mandy is mopping her floor, and it makes her mad as a hop to have you go tracking over it. I 'll go the front entry way if I can get my courage up."

"Poh! jus' as if a lot of ministers would hurt you if they did see you. You 're so *pas-sionately* afraid of everything, Polly Plummer. For a minister's daughter, I must say you have n't got very much sand."

"Why, Dotty Ferguson!" cried Polly, in open-eyed amazement. "You *have* got a new word! Why, it 's an *awful* bad word, Dotty! I 've — why, I 've heard boys use it."

"So 've I," said Dotty, calmly. "Maybe it 's a more better word for boys 'an it is for girls, but it means just the same no matter

who. My brother Bob says it, and he says it means it 's something you 're a coward if you have n't got. If I was you, Polly, I should go and do what I had to do, if there *was* a minister or two in the way."

"A minister or two! I 'll give you half this pink pep'mint if you do n't find nineteen hats out in that front hall this minute, Dot Ferguson! It 's a great big 'mittee-meeting; for papa said 't was going to be in his study this morning, and I forgot 'bout it. It 's about a church or something they 're going to build, and I heard papa tell mamma, 'We 're going to talk it up.' That 's a funny way to build a church, I think, — *talking* it up! But that 's why they 're here for."

"Well, let 'em," said Dot; "they won't hurt you."

"They might come out," said Polly, nervously. "And then they always take hold of your curls and say, 'Ah, how do *you* do,

little one!' There 's one man that always calls me 'Sissy!'"

"Do you hate him, Polly?" Susie asked it rather low, because she knew it was a dreadful question; but Polly heard and answered.

"Not so ve-ry much now, Susie. Once I did, but lately mamma makes me put him in my prayer, bedtimes. She says hating will keep you out of heaven. Mandy won't let me talk it out to her, either. She says it 's 'sinful to hold grudges.' All the same, I wish *that* man's hat was n't there. It 's the one that bothers me most of any."

"I 'm not afraid of any 'Sissy-man,'" called Dotty, boldly, running out into the hall to show she meant it. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven — seven on the hat-tree, Polly Plummer; and one, two, three, four on the table. Yes, one more on top of his cane with his gloves and overcoat. Great 'nineteen' that is!"

"Seven and four and one," said Susie. "That 's twelve, and it 's a great lot, Dotty, if you do n't happen to *like* ministers."

Susie was all for peace, and a moment more would have hushed Polly's fears, and sent her scudding up the carpeted stairs like a velvet-footed mouse to ask her mother for a fresh invoice of dolls' dry-goods, when "all of a sudden," as Mandy would have said, the hat on top of the cane rolled down off of it, the cane fell on the floor, and the gloves and the overcoat; and out of the hat rolled the most surprised-looking cat with a lot of silky white stuff all over his head and clinging in little rags to his paws. Of course it was Winky. He had made a regular rat's-nest of that hat, and clawed the inside all out of it. The three girls stood fairly speechless. Horror is no name for the way they looked. And what shall I say of their feelings!

"It might be the Sissy-man's hat!" said Dotty, and her eyes danced, though she did speak in a fearsome whisper.

"It might be all of their hats!" said Polly, terribly frightened. "Look, quick, girls, has that kitty done it to any more of them but just that one?"

"Would n't that gauzy stuff make lovely dolly-dresses!" said Susie, suddenly, snatching up the cat and managing to secure quite a large piece that his sharp claws had not made sieve-cloth of. "Oh, don't I wish"—

But nobody ever heard what she wished, for Polly turned round with a frightened white face, and looked as if she were going to burst out crying.

"It 's four hats he 's fixed," she whispered, taking up the four that had stood tops down on the table, and showing them, "and three more on the hat-tree are all spoilt. Oh, what in the world shall we do? Winky, you naughty, naughty, naughty cat! See

now what mischief you 've done! And what will papa say when he sees it?"

"Say," said Susie, anxiously, "perhaps he need n't see it. Maybe we can fix the linings in again."

"What with?" asked Polly, eagerly. "No, we can't. It is n't any use. We have n't any more of that nice stuff to do it with. That was lovely — some like Brousa silk — my mother 's got a scarf that came from Turkey, and this looks most e'zactly like it."

"We might take cheese-cloth," said Susie, hopefully.

"'N if we did, how could we sew it in?" asked Polly, practically. "The stitches would show, I most know, and there is n't any other way to do it."

"Unless you pasted it," said Dotty. "We 've got lots of mucilage — enough for forty hats. And up-stairs I know where there 's a bottle of Fish's glue" —

"You mean Page's glue, I suppose!" said Polly, crossly. Her troubles were beginning to tell on her temper.

"And if that won't do, I've got some over home that I know *will* hold!" said Susie, anxious to mend matters. "It's marked 'Solid-as-a-rock,' and mother says she never knew anything to part again in the same place after it had that on it."

"Would n't be very good to put on your hair, then, would it?" laughed Dotty, who could always see the funny side of a thing even if she was ready to cry her eyes out.

"O girls! O Dotty!" almost screamed Polly, going off suddenly into a helpless fit of giggling that fairly choked her in her efforts to keep still and not let the "Committee" hear her. "Suppose — just you suppose — that we did put on — some of that — glue Dotty told about, and that man put it on his head — his hat, you know — and it *stuck!*"

Polly was strangling now and so red in the face that both the girls pounded her on the back and told her to stop, to please stop for pity's sake. But she could n't seem to, and, for that matter, they were very nearly as badly off themselves. It takes so little to make you laugh when you are eight or nine years old, and each one of the three had a vivid picture of a tall, dignified gentleman trying vainly with both hands to lift his hat from his head to which (if the label on the bottle said true) it was glued forever, — as "solid as a rock." Pretty soon all three were laughing together, and they were laughing still in the sort of way that easily turns to sobbing, when the study door clicked and, one after another, the gentlemen began to file out leisurely, talking and chatting as they came, but coming all too suddenly upon the group of little girls, who stood, clinging to each other and giggling and holding the

telltale hats in their hands, just for all the world as if they had been playing with them.

HOW WINKY HELPED

"Eh, what 's this?"

"Ha, ha! fairly caught!"

"Playing with our 'stovepipes,' were you?"

"Bless my heart, what 's all this?"

"*Polly!*"

The last one of these remarks was all that Polly really cared about by this time. She ran to her father as soon as he spoke her name and began to sob out the whole story.

"We did n't mean to! We never knew a thing about it! Winky did it every bit, only but we was trying to think of a way to fix the lining in again, and there was n't any way but fish-glue and that would drop down on their hair and stick it!"

Her father looked up at the row of rather rueful faces that were bending each over a

somewhat battered head-covering, and flinging courtesy to the winds, he burst out into a hearty peal that made the cosey little parsonage ring again, especially as it was the signal for a general merry-go-round of laughter such as would do any minister's heart good of a Monday.

"Brethren, I will pay for the hats," he cried, patting Polly's stubby curls with one hand and holding out the other in a general gesture of friendliness to the sufferers. "You have still one thing to be thankful for. They did n't mend them with fish-glue!"

There was another laugh, and then one of the gentlemen stepped forward, smilingly, toward Polly who peeped at him with one grudging eye around her father's shoulder. It was the man who usually called her "Sissy."

"My little girls always beg the old hat-linings to make dolly clothes with," he said,

kindly. "Would n't you like some? They 're not torn very badly."

HOW WINKY HELPED

"Here 's some, too!"

"And here!"

"And here!"

"Wait till I scoop mine out!"

Everybody entered into the fun of it. The only regretful faces belonged to those whose hats had escaped damage. They were hardly equal to "scooping" the lining out of whole hats, but they said Amen to all that the others were doing.

Polly presently ran to her mother with an armful of soft, dainty, cobwebby stuff for doll-dressing, and dropped it all down in her lap in a crumpled heap, while she threw her arms round her neck and began to talk and cry and sob out her mixed-up feelings in the queer Polly-fashion that mother was used to.

"The Sissy-man started it — he was just as good as he could be. His little girls

always want 'em, and so p'rhaps I would. And here I 've been praying for him just as hard as I could every night — and I 'm never going to hate him another bit — nor I won't pray for him again a single once long as I live, see 'f I do!"

CHAPTER IV

An Easter Offering

IRST, they gave their own selves."

Papa Plummer smiled, and Polly passed up her plate, sure of good helping. It was a household custom in the Plummer family for the younger children to be asked to give the text after the morning service, usually at dinner-time. Sister Margery who was teaching in Sharon, and Tom, down in Maine, had to do more than that when they came home. Apart from

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any good they got out of the sermon, papa said that no boy or girl was going to grow up in his family with a habit of half-listening. They were all in training for reporters, and any one who could n't give a fair account of what had been said was called upon to show the reason why. Of course, if you were not more than ten years old, not so much was expected of you. Wally's part was the "Notices." "There 's a Pussy-willow Party for all the Sunday-school!" he shouted, "and it 's going down 'long the old willow road, and everybody 's going, down to the minister and deacons, that can *get* to go, and when they come home the church is going to be trimmed up with 'em" —

"With *who?*" asked Polly, to plague him.

—"and then after Sunday, they 're all going to be carted off to the Children's Hospital, 'cause the poor little children can't go pussy-willerin' for themselves!"

"Were there any other notices?" asked papa, when they had smiled a little over this one.

"I d' know," said Wally, indifferently. "Not any account, specially. Conferences and prayer-meetings and speakings. There 's a mothers' meeting, but I do n't go to that. You see, papa, you 'member what you 're *int*-rusted in!"

"True for you, my son," murmured papa, appreciatively. "Well, you are plainly interested in the Pussy-willow Party."

"I think it 's just lovely to give away things!" said Polly, lingering lovingly over her last teaspoonful of Sunday ice-cream. "I thought you had a be-*yew*tiful sermon this morning, papa!"

"Oh, you did!" said papa, dryly.

"Yes," said Polly; "did n't *you?* I liked what you said 'bout giving all you thought you could 'ford to, and then shutting your eyes tight and giving some more.

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I tried it all the rest of the sermon-time — just make-believe, you know. I played I 'd just given my two Sunday pennies — what I can 'ford to; and then I winked my eyes up awful tight and shied in another one."

"My dear child!" cried mother.

"Well, upon my word!" laughed papa, unable to help laughing, even if mamma did shake her head at him.

"*Shied!*" cried Wally in delight. "You use worser and worser words every day, Polly Plummer!"

"Oh, well, I did n't do it," said Polly, calmly. "It was only play make-believe. It 's great fun, and you can keep all your things just the same. I gave away most every single thing I pezess, — *'cept* my kitty, — and it did n't hurt a mite."

"Yes, *'cept!*" mocked Wally. "I guess you do n't be giving away your kitty in a hurry; you like her too well."

"Well, I would, too, Wally Plummer!

If I thought I ought to, I would. It is n't any fun to give away what you want so awfully specially your own self, but — but — but " —

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" There, there, dears, now do n't get to squabbling over make-believe virtues," laughed mother, coming to the rescue, as she often did, between teasing Wally and over-sensitive Polly. The little girl's sobs quieted under her mother's pooring fingers, and somehow they all stopped to listen, as in from the kitchen came the words of the song Mandy was humming: —

" Give, then, for Jesus give,
  There is something all can give;
Oh, do as the streams and blossoms do,
  And for God and others live."

" To tell the truth," said mamma, thoughtfully, when the children had been excused and she and papa were having a little quiet time together, " I believe our

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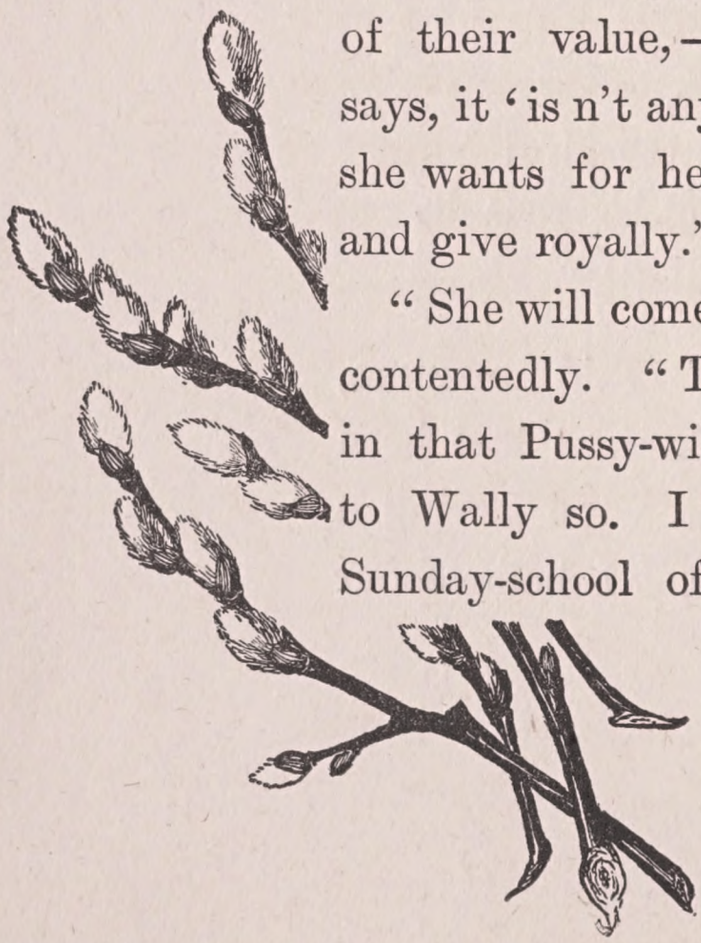
little Polly stated the case pretty well. She is n't naturally — that is, impulsively — generous. But she has a conscience that won't let her be really mean or stingy, and, as she said herself, if she thought she 'oughted to,' she would give the clothes off her back. That cast-iron little conscience of hers ought to make a grand woman of her."

"She is n't — selfish?" asked father, anxiously.

"No," said mother, "no; but she cares about her things, — has a real honest sense of their value, — and sometimes, as she says, it 'is n't any fun' to give away what she wants for herself. But she can give, and give royally."



"She will come out all right," said papa, contentedly. "They must all take hold in that Pussy-willow Party that appealed to Wally so. I 'm trying to train up a Sunday-school of givers and helpers. I

don't *want* it handed over to a Flower Committee or any other kind of a committee. They 'll go and have a good time first, getting the pretty things, then they 'll have another good time fixing the church up with them, and then the best time of all going with them afterward to that poor little children's hospital, where they and their gifts will be as welcome as sunshine. Next Sunday I shall follow up the same thought in connection with the Easter celebration. I want Easter to mean something to them besides new hats and fiddle-diddle. My work is with the young people. I wish I could make these little primary room babies see the beautiful real meaning of Easter — how God so loved that he *gave*, and that we must love till *we* give — not money, perhaps, but ourselves, first, as I told them to-day, and then our time and our thoughts and all the rest of it."

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"Yes, dear!"

There was no need for saying anything more, and so Mrs. Plummer did n't say it. When you know people well enough, you do n't have to keep saying things. They know.

The church did look beautiful the next Sunday. Everywhere soft gray banks of "pussies," and, peeping out here and there, like a splendid red flame through gray ashes, were spikes of scarlet geraniums that had come from half the people in the neighborhood. Mr. Plummer carried out his idea of training up givers and helpers even in the work of the Flower Committee. Everywhere the people were encouraged to give the church decorations, and to grow flowers on purpose so that they could give. He was sure to notice the plant-window in every house where he made a "parish call," and women came to have many a tender thought of the church as they picked off dead leaves and coaxed their backward

posies. When a plant did bloom, he always praised it, and seemed to expect that as a matter of course it would make its first appearance in front of the pulpit.

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That was why there happened to be one splendid pot of lilies along with the others after all. The woman who brought it had seven children "always around under foot" (as she said), but somehow or other she had found time to plant and water and love into blooming a wonderful stalk of perfumed blossoms, and the minister would have thrown all his pussy-willows out of the window rather than disappoint her loving plan of seeing them there in the place of honor.

"God so loved that he gave."

That was Mr. Plummer's sermon text, and little Polly listened with "eyes front," and not a bit of make-believe the whole way through, this morning. Some way a sweet thought of the great, wonderful gift

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of Jesus' life and love crept into her childish heart, and then came the other thought that always goes hand in hand with it — what could she do to show him she "loved back"? You know what I mean, children. When you think how Jesus has loved you, you can't help loving in your turn, and then of course you want to *do* something, as a kind of little silent way of saying "Thank you!" So it is no wonder that little Polly's heart was very soft, and she felt like saying Yes to every loving word of invitation that her papa was saying to her and all the people.

Mr. Plummer saw deep down into a good many little people's hearts that day besides Polly's. Sometimes it is easy to do so. Being a wise man, he knew that it is a great mistake ever to let good thoughts and feelings run to waste. If you do n't go at once and do something at such a time, you might better have no good feelings at

all. Such thoughts are like pansies that all "run to seed" because nobody picks them. Pretty soon your garden will be "all run out."

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So he came into the Sunday-school, as usual, at the last five minutes, and he said he was going to give them all a chance to do something. He knew that a lot of the boys and girls there felt as if they loved Jesus with all their hearts to-day — he could see it in their faces — and as if they would do anything in the world they could think of to please Him. And that kind of feeling, he told them, if it only went on through all the minutes of all the days, is what makes anybody a Christian. And the way to make it go on, and grow more and more and stronger and stronger, is to give it something to do all the time. Do every single little thing to please Jesus. If you give anything, give it for his sake, because you love him. "Who is there here," he

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asked, "that wants to give something this very minute — something he really loves and that is worth giving — just out of love for Jesus? I'll take any such gift — I don't care what it is — and I'll promise to find a use for it in his name, just as he would if you put it in his hand and said, 'Please take it with my love!'"

Well! you won't believe what happened. Over in one corner of the long primary row, up popped a little girl, and she said, "I've got six cents, and it's all my own candy money, and — I'd like to!"

"So you shall, dear child," said the pastor in a queer, unsteady kind of voice that he tried not to let be very shaky.

One little girl went and whispered to her mother a minute, and then stood up and said she should like to give a doll; and the minister said he thought he could find a beautiful use for that. He didn't laugh a bit when a boy handed up a whitey-gray bag

of marbles without saying anything. How a boy happened to have them in his Sunday pocket was a question that he did not see any need of bringing up just then, and he did n't look as if he saw anything funny in putting the bag right on top of the superintendent's pile of quarterlies for everybody to look at.

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But he was n't prepared to have his own little Polly Plummer pop up in her seat, behind the pillar, and say in a sweet, rather shrill voice (so that everybody could hear, even Mr. Wall, the sexton, whose ears were n't very much good to him common days): —

"I want to give Winky!"

"What 's the child say?" asked one of the old ladies in the Bible class. Hardly anybody there understood what she said. Of course a few knew that Polly had a cat, and that his name was Winky, but the rest did n't understand, and they kept looking

at the minister who stood there, looking more puzzled than they did. What was he going to do, and how was he going to get out of it? Had n't he promised to take any gift that was offered, and make or find a use for it? But what in the world could anybody do with a cat? Who wants a cat? He could n't sell, lose, or give one away. All the time there was Polly standing, red-faced, but patient, waiting for her father to say he would take it, just the same way as he had the others.

Really it was only a few seconds before he found his tongue, and began to say something, if for no other reason than to stop the giggling and laughing that was beginning to spread all over the room, and making poor little Polly's face redder and redder every minute.

Into the middle of his stammering sentence broke a clear, kind voice that made all eyes turn to see who was speaking.

"I have just thought of a lovely use for such a gift," said the clear, kind voice, "and if the little girl will stop and talk with me after the school is ended, I am sure she will be gladder than ever that she can give so dear an offering 'in His name.'"

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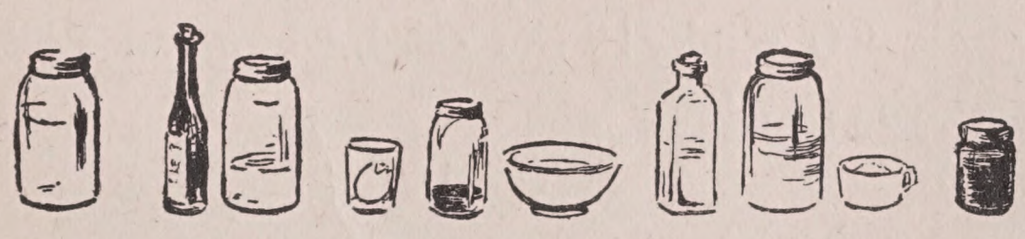
Polly drew a great sigh that was like a sob, and sat down. Then the superintendent's bell rang, and all stood up to sing the closing hymn, and when that was over, the kind-voiced stranger walked over to Polly's pillar to have a talk with the little girl who sat behind it. But there was no Polly there. She had slipped out during that last singing.

A CAT TO LEND

CHAPTER V

A Cat to Lend

HE front door was locked, as usual, and the key in Mr. Plummer's pocket; the side porch door was also locked, and the key in Mandy's pocket. She was expected to get home first from Sunday-school, and put on the potatoes for the two-o'clock Sunday dinner. Polly knew a trick about the fastenings of the buttery window, so the matter of keys did not trouble her. She climbed in over a row of glass jars containing cold coffee, milk left over from breakfast, thrifty savings from the cucumber bowl, and a lot of other bottled remnants designed to make it unpleasant for burglars, and at the same time (if they



did n't upset any of them) handy for Mandy. Polly was n't as skillful as a professional housebreaker, and her pink-sprigged Sunday delaine was decorated impartially with samples of nearly all of these "wet goods" by the time she had picked her way over them. She did not stop to sweep up the bits of broken glass or to cry over spilt milk. She ran swiftly up the back stairs to the room over the woodshed where Winky always spent what Mandy called the "fore part of the Sabbath," while the rest of the family were at church. He rose, yawning and stretching, to greet her. Something in her tragic face seemed to make him solemn, for he gathered his four feet together suddenly, and sat up, looking her straight in the face as if to say, "Well, what is it?"

Polly was down on the floor looking as if there were nothing left to live for.

"O Winky!" she cried, "how can I let you go?"

Winky winked. As he did not understand what she was talking about, there was nothing else to do.

"'Course I love to do something for Jesus his beautiful Easter day! I expect prob'ly they'll give you to the blind children in the Kindergarten, and they'll feel your soft fur, Winky, and find the pretty pink silk lining of your cute little ears, and poor your long, lovely tail; or else maybe they'll give you to the other children where we took the pussy-willows; and I'll be glad, Winky — I truly *will* be glad — I said I would, only but — *saying* you'll do a thing

is n't all there is to it. After that, you 've got to do it!"

"Polly Plummer!" cried Wally, rushing in like a whiff of a whirlwind. "There 's a man down-stairs that wants to see you! And it 's the man that said that about your kitty. He 's come."

"He 's come!" echoed Polly, solemnly, gathering Winky in her cuddling arms, and going slowly down the woodshed stairs to meet him.

The stranger sprang forward as she entered the room, and one glance at her misty eyes told him the state of the case as well as if he had heard her talk to the kitten up in the barn-chamber.

"And this is the little girl that has a cat to lend?"

"Yes," faltered Polly, "it 's a cat to *give*. I said I would."

"Yes, of course," assented the stranger. "I suppose you thought you would send it

to the Asylum, or the Home, perhaps, and your little pet would be a lovely Easter gift to them? It's a beautiful thought, certainly. The doll and the marbles and the other things will be used that way. They — they — the superintendent said they did n't exactly know what to *do* with a *cat*."

"Oh!" said Polly, with a real note of disappointment in her voice.

"But as I told you," went on the stranger, brightly, "I had a sudden idea pop into my mind, and I've come to talk it over with you. Do you know me? You know my father, Dr. Varney. He said he knew *you* ever since there was any Polly."

"Does he know my cat?"

"Well, not intimately. But I'll tell you what I heard him say only yesterday, and it put the whole idea into my head. He said he wished there was an Amusement Bureau, or something that would send out girls and

boys to entertain these poor little sick children, who have n't anything to play with or anything to do but lie and ache by the hour. And he said he wished the Christian Endeavorers, or King's Daughters, or something would start such a thing. It flashed over me in a minute that you and your kitty could n't be improved upon as an Amusement Bureau."

"Oh!" said Polly, half understanding, yet more than half puzzled. She had not thought the thing through yet as he had.

"They have such dreadful places to live in," he went on, watching her face. "I went with my father Saturday to see a little fellow who had his leg broken. He was only four years old. I had to climb over two wash-tubs to get to him, for he was in a kind of little side closet right off the kitchen, and his mother was washing. He had n't any playthings, or anything to do all day."

"Oh!" said Polly.

"Nights, when his father comes home, he stays with him and talks, and tells him things. His father is an expressman, and he took his little boy out with him to give him a ride, and somehow the little fellow fell under the wheel. The father feels so bad; but he can't stay at home with him, and he has n't much money to buy playthings. They have n't any cat. Probably there would n't be money enough to buy milk for one."

"Oh!" said Polly.

"That makes three times you've said 'Oh!'" remarked the gentleman, smilingly. "Do n't you think you might try some other letter of the alphabet?"

Polly did n't smile. She was too much in earnest.

"Why do n't you have your Bureau-thing begin right off, and make that poor little boy have some fun? You can have

fun even if you feel *awfully!* I know, because once I had the mumps on both sides, and it ached all over me, but Mandy read me, 'Susy's Six Birthdays,' and mamma read me, 'Helen's Babies,' and papa played, 'Give-Away' checkers with me, and it 's just the solemn truth that I had a perfectly lovely time. 'Course I don't know anything about broken legs."

"They are very much like mumps, I should say," smiled her friend, encouragingly. He wanted as much as possible of the new scheme to seem to come from her, and it did.

"Why couldn't I take Winky some morning — oh, I forgot! I haven't got Winky. Well, I could go my own self."

"Oh, you must have Winky!"

"How could I? I 've givened him away."

"Yes. Well, now, I have a plan. My

father sent me down here to see you about it."

"Dr. Varney!"

"You see he knows a good deal about you, and he told me a good deal about you. I asked him. You know, away off in New York, I do n't have very much chance to see people that I was born and brought up with, and so when I come home it takes me two or three days to catch up with the news; and I ask questions eight solid hours every day."

"Do you, really?"

"Pretty near. Father likes to have me. You are some of the very new news. Last time I came you were only a little baby. And he says you are very fond of cats."

"One cat," said Polly, dropping a kiss on Winky's nose.

"And he said *perhaps* — I could come and see about it — you might be willing to agree to take charge of Winky, sort

of keep him in trust, you know, and be on call any time he wanted you to go and give a half hour or an hour, just as your mother could spare you, for the Amusement Bureau."

Polly fairly gasped. But she asked a question.

"Does Dr. Varney have the say of my cat?"

"As I told you, he thinks he could make a very beautiful use of your cat. The superintendent is willing, if you are."

"Well, I am glad and thankful!" burst out Polly, earnestly, as a vision of the kind-faced, gray old doctor rose up before her. "For now I sha' n't worry so about boys plaguing her or little babies taking her up by the handle or hurting my itty-petty kitty-catty!" she finished, falling all at once into baby-talk, and hugging Winky till he mewed. The young man laughed at Polly's

idea of abuse, and especially at her way of expressing it, but stuck to the main point.

"The question is, will you do it?"

"It would be a new kind of a hospital nurse, would n't it?" said Polly, beaming.

"Very new!"

"Dr. Varney's son, I think you are just *sweet!*"

Polly knew that the young man's name was Gilbert, and probably, if she had thought, she would have known that his last name must be Varney, but somehow, just then, "Doctor Varney's son" seemed the very nicest name for him. It was as if the goodness and thoughtful kindness and gentleness and *motherliness* that she had known all her life in old Dr. Varney — for there are some men that you can say that word of — had suddenly "put on black" and reappeared in this dark-eyed, dark-haired young man with the bright red color

in his cheeks, and the strong brown hands of a champion golf-player.

"Young ladies usually like me!" he answered, composedly. "Though I don't know as they often say just *that* — to my face. Then I can tell him you agree to it?"

"I'll go tell him myself," said Polly, promptly. "That is, if mother does n't object to me visiting Sunday. It is n't such very much visiting — just down the street and round two corners. Besides, it 's" —

"Charitable work," supplied young Mr. Varney.

"Yes. I'll go ask her. You can stay and hold Winky."

When she came back Winky was all ready with hat and gloves on — her little brown kid mittens which were lying on the hat-rack table, and her old red "Tam" with the strings to it, which kept it on very nicely, if you did n't mind the greater part

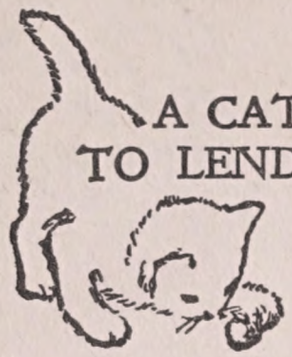
"DR. VARNEY'S SON, I THINK YOU ARE JUST SWEET!"

of it lying along his back as a sort of overcoat. She caught him up giggling, and would n't take off his queer street costume, but, finding a head-covering more suitable to the season for herself, carried him in that rig to see the doctor.

He was lying on the sofa in his study, with his big round goggles pushed up on the top of his head, and his old gray dressing-gown trailing on the floor, instead of being wrapped round him as it ought to be. Polly came up close to him the minute she was let in, and asked, pointblank, "Did you really mean it?"

"Mean what?" he cried, sitting up and fumbling for his glasses. "Oh, the cat! Bless my soul! And Polly. Mean what, I'd like to know? What's that young rascal been telling you?"

"Tell him, Polly," said "that young rascal," who stood by, enjoying things. So Polly told him, in her own way, all the facts



of the case, even putting in at the end some of the feelings.

"Well, well, well!" cried the old man, looking at her admiringly and lovingly. "Of course I meant it — every word I said about it. What do you think of it as a scheme, now? By way of going into partnership, say, with the old doctor?" He had pulled her down beside him on the sofa, by this time, and with an arm around her, was rapidly developing the scheme himself in ways that his son had not as yet outlined. "Doctors do have 'em, you know, — nurses that they can have any time on call. I know one old chap that runs three, keeps 'em busy all the time, and no end of good they do his patients, too. I think I could manage two nicely."

"Me and Winky?" said Polly, gravely.

"That his name? Yes; you and Winky. Most any day I can count on you to spare me an hour to ride with me in my old

buggy? The cat's just right this way. Take you both to-morrow to see that expressman's boy, if you want. Make him laugh, I guess, and that's just what I want. He's fretting himself into such a fever the leg never'll heal in the Lord's world."

"I know mother'll let me," said Polly, confidently. "I have n't asked her but she'll say 'Yes.' Now I'll go home so she won't worry, but I will watch for you every minute till you come, you darling old doctor!"

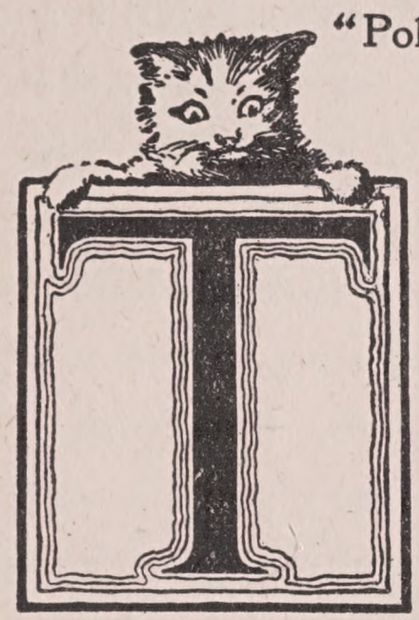
"All right. Kiss me, first."

"Kiss Winky," said Polly. And the good old doctor obediently touched the tip of one of Winky's little fuzzy ears.

"POLLY PLUMMER, SHE"—

CHAPTER VI

"Polly Plummer, She" —

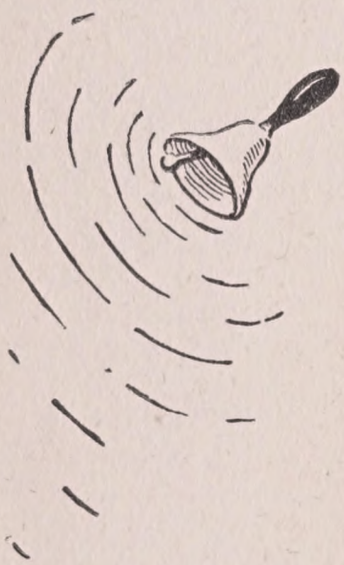


THE bright June sun was already up and smiling broadly at the world, as if it knew it had got the better of it, and Miss Lois, the doctor's sister, said it was high time honest folks were up, too, and had their breakfast. She made the doctor start a great deal earlier than he wanted to these fine mornings.

"Guess that must be the rising bell!" he groaned, sleepily, as she rang for the third time, and pretty sharply, too. "Dear me, I'm getting old and lazy! I've got to look around for an assistant."

"After all, I suppose he's tired," said Miss Lois to herself, remembering all at once how he had been called up at midnight, and did n't get back for at least an hour and a half. "Half-past six is n't so very bad, considering. I believe that Jones' baby just *plans* for colic at midnight."

Just then the door-bell tinkled loudly, and Miss Lois went pattering to see who it was. If it was late for breakfast, it was certainly early for callers, and she said to herself that it was probably a peddler or something coming at that time o' day, and ringing the bell as if they wanted to pull it out by the roots and run off with it.

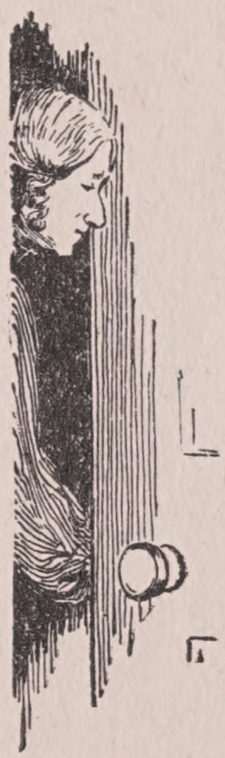


"Mostly when they ring so loud, they've got 'a little work' to show you," she remarked, shrewdly, as she undid the night-bolt. "Anybody that's sick comes round to the night-door. I can tell them

they might as well save their breath to" —

"Does Dr. Varney want to buy any more cats?"

Bertie Clapp's freckled face looked very honest and eager, so that even Miss Lois could n't think he was making game of her, and yet what other reason could possess a boy like that to come around offering cats to sell?



"Any more *what?*" she said in as sharp a voice as if he had forgotten to wipe his feet on the door-mat.

"Cats," he repeated, sturdily. The sight of Miss Lois' corkscrew curls always made him quake in his boots, but he was n't going to give in without telling what he had come for. He was afraid to look up to the sharp gray eyes and the prim, straight mouth, all puckered with wrinkles that came from years of saying "No" to people; but he told his errand,

and of course Miss Lois said, "No, he don't!" before he got through with it. He expected that.

"Well, what'd he buy Polly Plummer's cat for, then?" he demanded in such a very sharp voice because of his disappointment that Miss Lois shut the door in his face without further ceremony.

"Won't anybody talk short to me on my own door-step!" she declared, grimly, and went off about her own affairs in high dudgeon.

Bertie, left out on the door-step, hugged his cat, and told it just exactly what he thought of Miss Varney, never minding that the windows were all open and that lady where she might have gathered a good deal of valuable information if she had cared to listen.

"Never asked me what I wanted to sell a cat for, nor anything!" he grumbled as he stood kicking the door-scraper. "'S if

a fellow would go 'n' sell his kitty-cat, anyway, 'thout he had to; but when the cattle-show is coming, what you *going* to do? I don't know how that mean little Polly Plummer got round the doctor so! 'Course he paid her a lots o' money for it, if she does pretend she gave it to him. Don't see what he wants o' cats, but if he does he can have 'em. We fellows would ruther have the money. And he 'll have a chance to if he does want to. I made the rest o' the boys hold off till I got the first chance, seeing I thought about it, but the whole nine of 'em 's going to try. Whoever gets the most money 'll have to divide up with the rest, that 's all. Huh! Jimmy, that you?"

"*Time* 't was me!" said Jimmy. "You 've stayed just 'bout six hours on that door-step, and not sold your cat neither! Now play fair and let somebody else have a chance."

"All right; go ahead. But it won't do you any good with Miss Lois there to nip your nose off."

Jimmy marched up courageously, however. He pulled the bell in a do-or-die fashion, just as Bertie had, and the door opened with a sharp click that made the brindled cat in his arms prick up his ears and arch his back suspiciously.

"Polly Plummer, she," — began Jimmy, as soon as he could get his mouth open.

"No, she did n't neither!" interrupted Miss Lois, who had interviewed the doctor, and knew what she was talking about. "The doctor has n't bought any cats, and he is n't thinking about it. Do you suppose he 's planning to set up some kind of a cat asylum?"

"I — I did n't know!" replied Jimmy, meekly. Miss Lois banged the door, and he went sorrowfully down the steps.

"What 's all this ringing so early in the

morning, Lois?" asked the doctor, as he passed his cup for a second filling. "No chance for a man to have so much as a cat-nap."

"Cat-nap!" cried his sister, provoked at his choice of a word. "Do n't say 'cat-nap' to me! I 'd take any cat by the nape of its neck that showed its head in the house to-day, I do believe. All the boys in town are possessed to pester me, and this morning it 's cats. Expect they 'll bring 'em at the rate of about one every fifteen minutes all day, now they 've got a-going!"

It seemed as if she were a true prophet, for the meal was n't ended when tinkle-tinkle went the bell again.

"Well, I never!" she cried, thoroughly provoked and vexed. "If *that* boy 's got a cat in his arms, be it black or white or malty" —

"Here, Aunt Lois," began her nephew,

laughing, "let *me* see what all this menagerie is about. They seem to have got on the track of little Polly Plummer, and if I 've made trouble for you, it 's only fair that I go and set things right again. You sit still, auntie!"

"Eat them up, Gilbert," said Dr. Varney, helping himself to another muffin. "Your aunt would, in a minute."

"Well, upon my word!" said young Mr. Varney, opening the door and smiling genially at the red-faced boy who stood there with a big Angora kitten sitting up in the crook of his arm. "An Angora, sure as Sunday! Do you boys peddle cats of that breed for a living?"

"There 's just one kind of a cat that 's worth giving house-room," Miss Lois was saying, back at the breakfast-table, "and that 's an Ang-goarer" (so she pronounced it). "I 've seen Ang-goarer kittens that I could and would have made a pet of, with

their soft, fluffy necks and their big tails and their ears and all. I 've always wanted one."

"Is n't any Nangora 'bout this cat," said Joey Peters, looking down proudly at his handsome burden. "She 's better 'n a Nangora. Look at the tail on her!"

"Handsome tail, is n't it? Not an Angora? What kind do you call her?"

"Persia," said Joey, eagerly. "My auntie says that 's the handsomest cat in the world. And the way you know 'em from a Nangora is their long, silky hair, and the tail that 's fluffy like a feather. See?"

Joey lifted the long, plume-like tail as he spoke, and the beautiful creature leaped to the floor of the hall and walked in stately fashion across the Turkish rug at the foot of the stairs, and into the library.

"Never mind — do n't call her back," said the young man, hospitably. "Step in. I think she is going to consult the encyclo-

pedia under *Cats*, or the Century, to see if you have really rightly named her. This way, ma'am," he said, politely, pulling out two or three books of reference, some with colored plates, and spreading them out on the floor gravely before her fluffy ladyship. "Let 's see what they say. M-m-m. 'Angora *or* Persian.' 'Angora, sometimes spoken of as Persian.' But here 's a magazine article by Olive Thorne Miller, too, a good authority which insists on a difference. 'In form, the bewitching Persian does not greatly differ from the Angora, but the tail is much more effective, for the longest and the thickest set hairs being at the tip, they form a magnificent plume, which the dignified owner carries proudly erect, waving in the air as he moves.' Is your tail 'effective,' eh? Let 's see if you carry it proudly erect! Well, my boy, suppose we say that, for all practical purposes, this cat is an Angora. That 's the kind of

cat I 'm looking for to-day. My aunt has a great desire for an Angora. What did you say you would sell her for?"

"What 'll you give?" said Joey. "All we want is enough to go to the cattle-show."

"Who 's 'we'?"

"Me and nine more. Polly Plummer, she said she was going to let the doctor have her cat Winky — or, anyway, Wally said so — and we thought if the doctor was buying cats maybe we could get the money to go with."

"Where did you get your cats?"

"Oh, some we had, and some we traded for. I swapped a little puppy-dog with one of the boarders down t' the beach for mine."

"And you say you were all coming here to try and sell your cats?"

"Oh, not all at once," said Joey. "One after the other 'long in the course o' the day, so 't they would n't get tired of us."

"I see. And you would be perfectly satisfied if you got money enough to take you all in and perhaps a bag o' peanuts over?"

"Guess we would!"

"And you would n't bring any more cats if we took this one?"

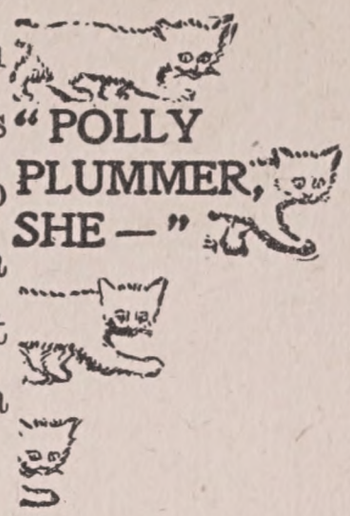
"No, indeed. I 'd tell the other fellows."

"Well, you just wait here a minute while I go speak to my aunt about it."

"You do n't mean to say you asked him into the libra'y, Gilbert!" said Miss Lois, wrathfully. "And he with another cat! Well, he 'll get out o' that pretty quick, now I tell you!"

Gilbert whispered something into his father's ear, and the two men followed her gleefully on tiptoe. Round the bend of the staircase they stopped, and watched her standing on the threshold of the library. Plainly, what she saw both

pleased and surprised her, so they crept forward and peeped over her shoulder. On the rug in front of one of the low bookcases stood Joey with his cat perched on the top of it, while he reached up his arms with a caressing motion, wholly unconscious that any one was looking at him. It was a pretty picture.



"My! what a beauty cat!"

"Ain't she?" beamed the boy, looking round delightedly. "Polly Plummer, she"—

"Pooh on Polly Plummer! I sh'd think I 'd told boys enough this morning that the doctor is n't buying cats. But that is n't saying that I would n't like that one if I could get it."

"I make you a present of it, auntie!" said her nephew, kissing her unexpectedly on her wrinkled cheek as he came close up behind her. "Here 's your money, bub, and remember the bargain. Hold on a minute, though. Set down your cat — she 's

yours, auntie, yes, really — and come out here a minute. I want to speak to you. Now, here 's the money. Do you want it in half-dollars? It will divide better. But — why do n't you invite *me* to go along with you, and take you into all the side-shows, and treat you now and then? What say?"

"Why, *'course* and — of *course!* Say, won't you?"

"Seeing you urge me," said Mr. Gilbert, graciously. "Remember, this party is to be personally conducted, and I 'm the conductor."

"All right," said Joey, joyfully, "and thank you, thank ye, thank" —. A trail of "thank-yous" followed his flying feet as he suddenly took to his heels and vanished down the road. He had caught a glimpse of a stealthy row of boys, each with a cat in his arms, and, mindful of his agreement, was on the run to head them

off before they came near enough to trouble anybody. As for their new friend, he looked, too, and laughed.

"Good beginning!" he said, thoughtfully. "Cattle-show first, and then the Sunday-school. I won't let it hurt them any. I 'll have that whole ten at the crook of my finger before the month is out. And, as Aunt Lois would say, 'it 's all along o' little Polly Plummer.'"

DOCTOR WINKY

CHAPTER VII

Doctor Winky

POLLY had dressed Winky up for missionary duty for what she called "three mornings in concussion," and nothing came of it. No stout old gold-spectacled doctor came to carry out his part of the program. On the fourth day, however, the low, roomy chaise stopped at the Plummer dooryard.

"Is Dr. Winky at home?"

Mandy stared, then burst out laughing. For a moment she had forgotten that Winky was engaged as the doctor's assistant.

"I 'll go see," she said. "Any word to send 'em?"

"Oh, Polly 'll know," he said, easily. "I 'll wait out here till she gets her hat on."

"Mamma," cried Polly, running in all in a flutter with her white sash-strings flying, "I may go, may n't I?— I truly may? And you won't feel lonely or neglected or anything because I go away and leave you with nobody but Mandy and Wally? And, papa, *you* won't?" she implored, whisking round so that the beautiful bow mamma was tying came all undone. "Because it would be dreadful to go off doing mish'nary work and leave my dearest, darlingest home untookened care of!"

Papa, who had not yet gone to his study for the morning, held his paper a trifle higher so that it hid his mustache.

"It is all right, little girl," he said, kindly.

"How about Wally?" asked mamma, not merely to tease her. She wanted her to get in the habit of considering Wally.

"Oh, Wally!" said Polly, blankly. Then, after a pause, "You ought to know, mamma, that I would do just anything for that boy, but when it comes to giving up doing good for the sake of" —

"Your brother," suggested Mrs. Plummer.

"— I think it's asking a little *too* much!"

"Go along, goosie!" laughed mamma, giving her a little pat and push toward the door. "Wally and I have a little plan of our own, and your going won't make a bit of difference."

"Jump in!"

The doctor spoke quietly and pleasantly, but it was the tone that meant "Quick!" with Dr. Varney, so she did not keep him waiting. Once in, they jogged along comfortably through the pleasant rose-bordered

L. of C.

roads till they reached a patch of woods where the wild roses gave way to tangled bushes, and then to slim young saplings beyond which the tall pines shot up straight as needles into the far blue sky, which could be seen only in handbreadth glimpses through their tops.

"Oh, *are* you going to take the woods road?" she cried in delight as the old chaise took a swing at the crossroads.

"Don't you like it?" asked the doctor, watching her pleased face.

"Love it!" said Polly. "In there somewhere is a place where lots of little red berries grow. Right on the ground, Dr. Varney! and oh, they're as sweet as anything! Papa let me get out and pick a cupful once, — his little rubber drinking-cup that he always carries in his pocket. I suppose *you* could n't stop and let me get out and pick some, just a little few, could you?"

"Partridgeberries, do you mean? Long, bright stems running over the ground? Little round, shiny leaves? A kind of a cherry smell to the blossoms?"

"Dr. Varney, you 've had some! You 've been partridging your own self, for that 's *just* the way they are. Oh, *could* you? Just a little minute?"

"Oh, I suppose if too many of my patients are n't dying" —

"*Are* there any of them dying?" asked Polly in a low, hushed tone.

"Dying to see me!" chuckled the fat old doctor, laughing at her big eyes. "No, thank you, ma'am, they are all very comfortable this morning. Not a 'dangerous' case among 'em. I 'll let you get out 'a little few minutes,' if you want to when we get along to a good place."

By and by they came to a sunny, open space where Polly was sure she could see the pretty vines of the *Mitchella* creeping

round the foot of some trees, and the doctor obligingly came to a halt and let her get out.

"You hold the cat," said Polly, putting him in Doctor Varney's lap for safe-keeping. "He 's a little rascal, and is just a-*bound* to run away, and papa says he *will not* give out any more notices from the pulpit about him, if he never comes back."

"Did he ever do that?" laughed the doctor.

"Well, he did n't igg-zactly mean to, but he got a-reading it before he noticed that I wrat it. Do n't see anything the matter about that, anyway, if he did. All it said was, 'Would the commogation please be kind enough to see if any of 'em had got Polly Plummer's cat.' There was some more to it, but when he got as far as that he stopped and would n't read any more, but just *glared* down into our pew, and all

DOCTOR WINKY

the people giggling and stuffing handkerchiefs and things. I wish 't he 'd gone along and said some more of it, for it told just who 't was he followed home on a bicycle, and the young man 'at was with her and all about it, and I should 'a' got my kitty back a lots quicker if he had, but he did n't. Papa 's real cranky 'bout some things."

"Oh, glory!" laughed the doctor, leaning back and shaking so that Winky was disgusted and made a flying leap over the dashboard, not being at all used to such an uneasy resting-place. "Wish I 'd been there to hear! Well, you get your berries now, young woman, or somebody *will* be dying — of old age — before I get there to see what ails them. I 'll give you just five minutes by the watch — be off with you!"

Polly had n't anything to get the berries in but her pocket, but being hard and dry they do not make as much trouble in a

pocket as some other kinds of berries, and by the time the doctor clicked his watch-cover and cried, "Time 's up!" she had a nice little handful, and a spicy bunch of checkerberry leaves besides, plucked while she was poking around among the dry moss and vines after the berries.

"Like some pippins?" she asked, holding up some of the tender young reddish stems as she nestled down beside him. Winky was placed between the two for safe-keeping. The doctor had his reins and whip in hand, but he bent his head sidewise and took a nip at her offering, and said it made him think of the days when he went barefoot.

After that the horse trotted along merrily, till they came out at the other edge of the woods into a straggling village, and on and on to where the houses grew thicker, and then turned into a wide cobble-paved driveway which wound up and around be-

tween rows of shady trees to a square brick building with a front like a factory, there were so many windows in it.

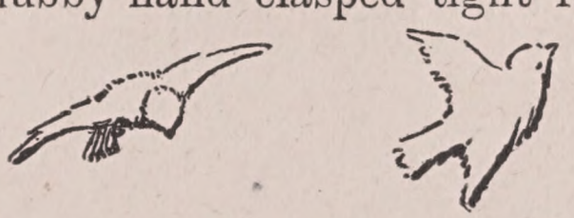
"What a lot of windows!" said Polly, as they stopped in front of the long flights of steps.

"Lots of sunshine," answered the doctor. "That 's what you want in a children's hospital."

"Is that what you brought me for?" asked Polly, joyously.

"Just exactly!" nodded the doctor, glancing at her as he hitched his horse, and pulled the netting to protect flank and back from the flies and mosquitoes. "I 'm going to take you into the accident ward. Keep that face on you, and you and your cat will be a godsend."

"'Most all stairways and entries, is n't it?" whispered Polly, skipping softly by the doctor's side, as he went puffing along with her chubby hand clasped tight round



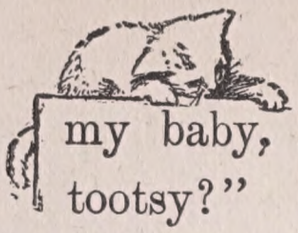
what by courtesy you might have called his "little" finger.

"We 'll get to something else by and by," he panted, cheerfully. "To the right now — this door — here you are."

Rows of little, white, narrow beds; rows of little, round, black, brown and yellow heads; white-capped, bib-aproned nurses, standing around here and there, or walking up and down the aisles between the beds — this was what Polly saw when the doctor flung open the door and came into the big, sunny, many-windowed room that seemed instantly sunnier and brighter as it echoed to his jolly, "Good-morning." That word from Dr. Varney, somehow, always sounded like a congratulation, so that you felt all at once what a beautiful world it is, and what a happy person you ought to be to be alive in it. Dr. Varney believed in sunshine, for mind and soul and body, and if he did n't find windows enough in your

house when he came to see you, he advised you to knock a hole in the wall somewhere and make one. He helped build this hospital himself, so of course there were windows enough. He had awnings at all of them — gay green-and-white ones — that kept the glare out, but all over and all through and everywhere there was the beautiful, sweet light that God made on purpose for people to get well in. There was a general bobbing up of heads as he entered.

"Hi-you!" he said, gaily, pinching the nose of one brown-faced little fellow with an arm in a sling, but nothing else the matter with him. "What do you look so glum for when I come in, eh? Anybody been giving you pickle-limes?" "*Your* head belongs on the pillow, bub!" to another whose bandage showed that he had hurt his forehead and the top of his head in some way. "Kick up your heels, if you want to, but keep *that* end quiet. Well,



my baby, how 's the little broken footsy-tootsy?"

The last words were spoken in the tenderest, mother-y voice as the doctor stooped beside a bed where a baby-faced little thing lay watching him with big black-velvet eyes, and a mouth serious enough to have belonged to her grandmother.

"It aches!" she cried, pitifully, trying to move the poor little bandaged foot, and then bursting out in a long, quivering wail when she found she could n't.

The doctor beckoned to Polly over his shoulder, and the next minute Winky dropped down on the pillow beside the crying child, and began to purr with all his might and main, as if he knew that was what he was put there for.

The sobs stopped short, and the black-velvet eyes opened in amazement. Two little arms crept softly up and twined around Winky's fuzzy neck.

"He 's saying 'Poor' to you!" said Polly, delightedly, looking under the doctor's arm and beaming on her. "Hear him: '*Poor! poor! poor!*' He wants to say, 'Poor little girl! I 'm sorry!'"

Polly's tone was so loving and comforting that the shy little thing did not shrink away from her as she did from most people, even the nurses, but she tightened her grasp on Winky as if she were afraid Polly might take him away from her.

"No," said Polly, as the doctor moved away, satisfied to let Polly manage this "case" for the present, "I won't take him, oh, not for a long and long time. I guess the doctor 's got a lot of other rooms to go in, and I 'm just going to stay in this one. I 'm your visitor. Will you like to have me?"

The black-velvet eyes looked at her solemnly, but the child nodded two or three times, so Polly was satisfied.

"Would you like to have me leave my kitten to hold in your arms a little while? His name 's Winky."

Another nod, and a tighter clasp that almost stopped the cat's purring, but no language.

Polly laughed, and putting her hand in her pocket drew out two bright red berries which she put gently into one of the tight little fists. As the child saw what they were, the first smile appeared on her poor little drawn face, and a dimple in her left cheek played hide-and-seek for a moment. That was thanks enough for Polly, and she turned to look around the big room and see who else needed comforting. A little way off was a poor fellow with his face pretty much all covered over with neat strips of court-plaster, very necessary, doubtless, but not at all improving to his beauty. Near him was a two-or-three-year-old child, not crying, but looking as if she

"WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE ME LEAVE MY KITTEN TO HOLD IN YOUR ARMS A LITTLE WHILE?"

had been, and was going to again. Polly crossed over.

"You poor boy!" she said, in a soft voice of pity, her eyes full of real tears. She thought how bad she should feel if that was Wally.

The boy turned his head away as far as his hurt cheek would let him, and said, "*Yah-yah!*" like a snarly little tiger-cat.

"'Peak like you do when you laugh!" piped the baby on the next cot, wistfully. "You *laughed* to *her!*" pointing with one tiny finger over to the other little girl with the cat, from whom Polly had just turned away.

That minute Polly received her first valuable lesson in nursing. Pity is the last thing on earth that a sick person wants or ought to have given him. Laugh! Look happy! Be just as much like a stray sunbeam as the good Lord gives you power. Then "speak like you do when you laugh,"

and children will "cry for you" as if you were a new kind of patent soothing-syrup. Try it, if you do n't believe me, the next time anybody has the mumps or the dumps at your house.

Polly had the kind of genius that is good at taking hints. She drew up her mouth-corners and said in her brightest voice, "Guess what I 've got in my pocket for you."

"Candy," said the little one. The scowly boy near by let his eyes look toward her with interest.

"Guess again!"

"A doll!"

"Pills!" said Polly, giggling. "Little red pills! I 'm a doctor and you 've got to take just what I give you!"

Pills did n't sound bad in that funny voice, and both children looked as if they expected something nice when she put her hand again in her pocket.

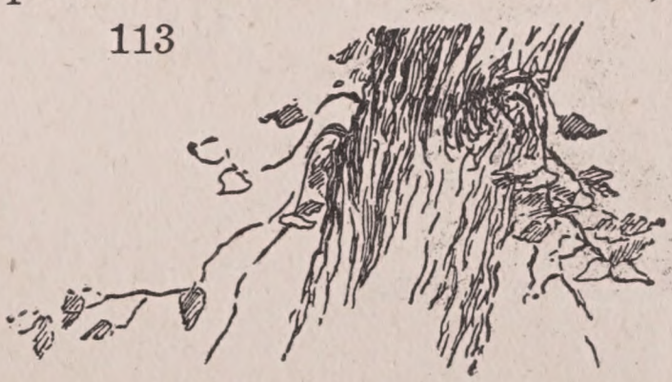
"Here are ten pills," she said, counting out ten red berries into the little one's hand. "To be taken one at a time just whenever you feel like it!"

DOCTOR WINKY

The baby laughed, and shook her red pills gleefully from one hand to the other, while Polly turned with a gay smile to the boy on the other bed.

"Want some?"

"Yes," he said, gruffly, and she served him in the same way with ten dainty little doses, which in spite of directions he gulped at one swallow in utter disregard of consequences. Polly laughed again, and sat down a minute on the foot of the cot to tell him where she got them, and what a lovely ride they had through the woods, and how she saw a red squirrel run up a tree, and about the squalling cat-bird that made her cat afraid, so that he ran to her The boy was interested and would probably have looked pleasant in the course of time,



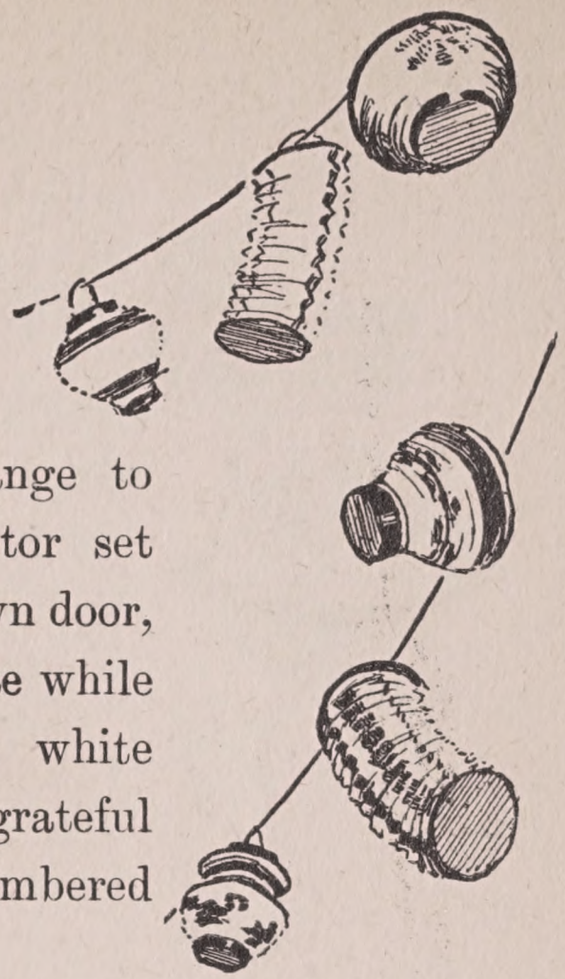
if she could have stayed long enough; but she had other patients to visit, and at least half a pocketful of berries.

At last the doctor came back, and together they went to coax away Dr. Winky, who had given all his valuable attention that morning to one patient. She did not cry when she had to give him up, for Polly promised that she would come again next week, and anybody that looked at Polly could see written all over her face in big-primer letters, "This girl tells the truth." So nobody had the least doubt that what she said she would do, she *would* do.

While the doctor sat down a minute to examine the poor little hurt foot, Polly walked up and down the long ward past every bed, and let almost every one have a hug of the kitty, and then she came back and rewarded the little one with one more squeeze of him, before she took Dr. Varney's hand and walked with many a back-

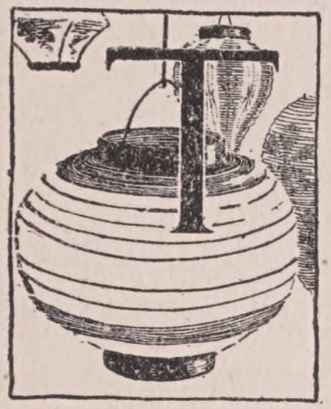
ward look and smile out of the accident ward of the big hospital. Then they rode home to dinner by the cool woods road, and somehow the ride this time seemed happier than the one going in the morning.

A BEAUTIFUL BIRTHDAY



CHAPTER VIII

A Beautiful Birthday



THINGS looked strange to Polly as the doctor set her down at her own door, and waited a minute while she unlatched the white gate and waved a grateful good-bye to him. She never remembered seeing the house trimmed up so.

"Looks just like Fourth of July or a lawn-party!" she decided, and ran round to the back door to get Mandy to explain. Strings of gay-colored lanterns ran across the long piazzas, a little white tent was pitched in the side-yard, the croquet set was out, the tennis-net stretched, and a new hammock hung under the apple-tree.

A BEAUTIFUL BIRTHDAY

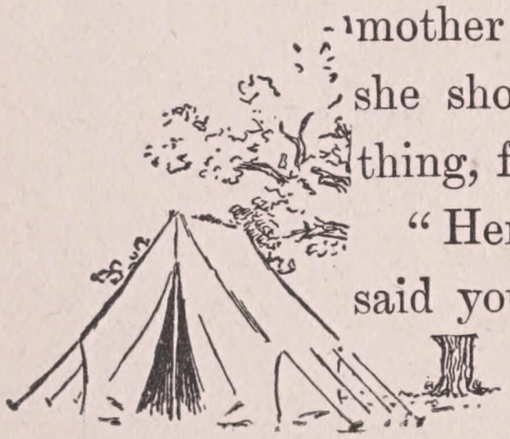
"Something 's happened, Mandy!" she called, in great curiosity. "Do tell me what it is!"

"Tom 's happened, and Margery," said Mandy, coming to the door in an excited state of mind, and flourishing the carving-knife in her right hand in a way that might have been startling to some people.

"Tom — and Margery!" repeated Polly, stupidly. "I thought Tom was teetering down in Maine" —

"Tutoring, I suppose you mean," interrupted Mandy.

"And as for Margery, all I 've got to say is, if she 's come, she 's gone and told a regular whippety-whopper, for she wrote to mother in her very i-denti-cal last letter that she should come home, if it 's a possible thing, for my *birthday*, and here it is" —



"Here it is your birthday. Your mother said you 'd forgot it."

"Why, Mandy Meeker! Do you really, truly, honestly mean that it 's my birthday? The twenty-ninth of June? I thought 't was n't till next week, Monday!"

"Stid o' which, it 's this week, Friday. I 've always heard Friday was an unlucky day."

"Unlucky!" cried Polly. "Calling my birthday unlucky! With a father and mother and two brothers and a sister, and you and the cat! And then Dr. Varney and young Mr. Varney, and just 'bout a *million* more other folks that love me! You 're just 'pretend cross,' Mandy Meeker, and it does n't worry me a bit, 'cause I know you 've just likely as not got some beautiful s'prise or other tucked away in your pantry for my birthday. That 's a way with you when you make believe cross at me!"

"There, get out with you, you chunk o' blarney stone!" cried Mandy, looking as

guilty as if she thought Polly could see through the wall of grocery packages which she had built around a certain big, round cake with marshmallow frosting on it, and ten enticing little pink and white candles set in rosebud sconces all around the edge. In the middle was a larger one to "grow on." Polly was innocent, however, and only spoke out of her own happy consciousness of a worldful of friends. She had never dreamed of such a thing as anybody not loving her.

All this while mother had been invisible, which was quite an unusual thing in the Plummer house when father or any of the children came home to it. No matter if she was at the top of the house, down she came, and somebody was always the gladder for her coming. Polly began to wonder all of a sudden what was the matter.

"Mother! Where 's mother?" she called,

running up-stairs and all over the house to find her.

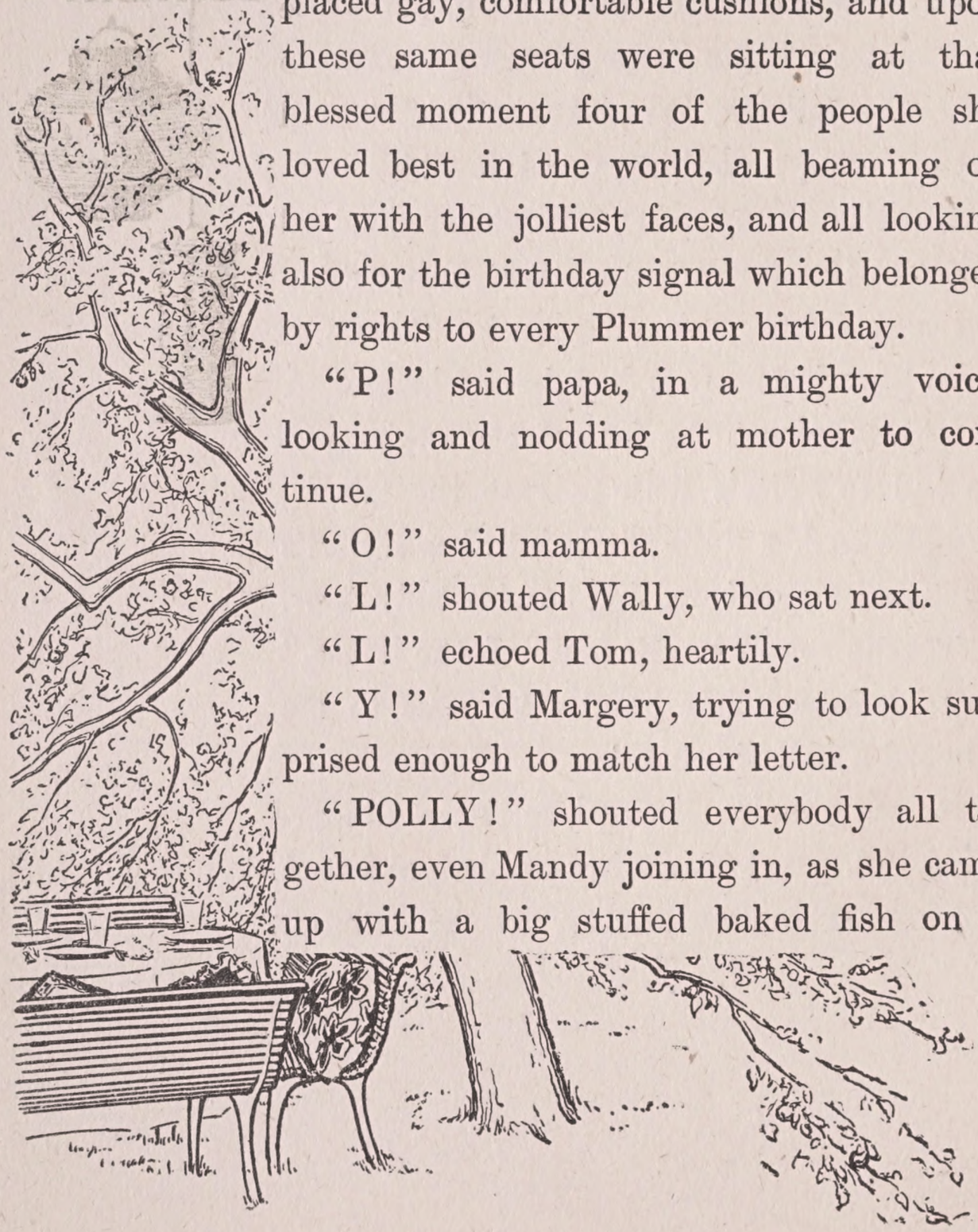
"No mother up here!" she cried, half-frightened. "No Wally, either, nor Tom nor Margery nor anybody that ought to be in a house when a little girl comes home to it! You tell me, now, somebody! You'll get me mad, first thing you know!"

A little stamp of her foot emphasized this last thrilling warning, which, however, did not seem as impressive as it might have been if the foot had been bigger. A hearty laugh at the foot of the stairs put an end to Polly's little private theatricals, and she took a flying leap into her father's arms as he stood waiting at his study door.

"Come round to the back of the house," he said, taking her hand. "Seems to me I heard a bell ringing."

It was the loveliest place for a dinner-table. A great spreading apple-tree swept a circle of branches clear to the ground,

A BEAUTIFUL BIRTHDAY



making a natural arbor. Somebody, since morning, had fixed a strong stationary table, with long settee-seats on all sides of it; and over these somebody else had placed gay, comfortable cushions, and upon these same seats were sitting at that blessed moment four of the people she loved best in the world, all beaming on her with the jolliest faces, and all looking also for the birthday signal which belonged by rights to every Plummer birthday.

"P!" said papa, in a mighty voice, looking and nodding at mother to continue.

"O!" said mamma.

"L!" shouted Wally, who sat next.

"L!" echoed Tom, heartily.

"Y!" said Margery, trying to look surprised enough to match her letter.

"POLLY!" shouted everybody all together, even Mandy joining in, as she came up with a big stuffed baked fish on a

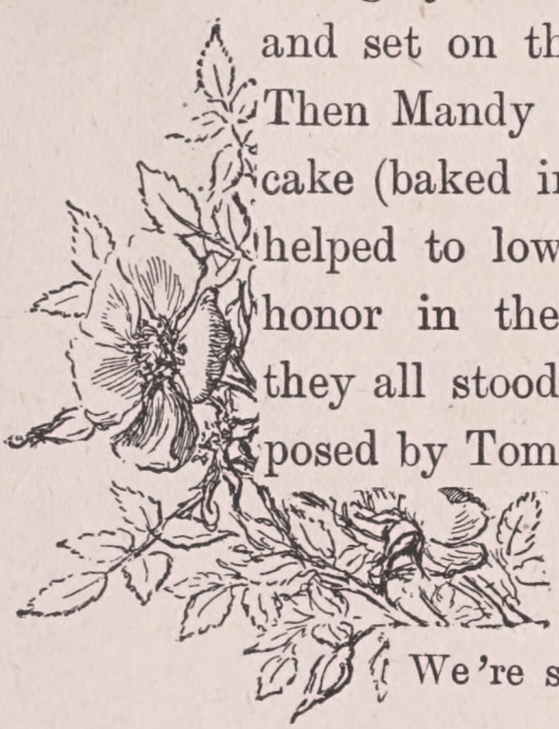
platter, all trimmed with little bunches of green parsley, and delectable yellow slices of lemon. This was Polly's favorite dish, six days in the week and Sunday, so of course mother ordered it for her birthday. A laugh came when Winky, scared by such a family demonstration, joined his howl to the others, and disappeared in the friendly shelter of the tent.

Polly was so happy she could n't express herself in any way but kisses. Tom got his full share, and then it was Margery's turn. Dear Margery, who was so dainty and darling, and spoke always in a "softly" voice that made you think she was just too gentle to live in this world, anyway, and yet, as Mandy said, "ruled that school in Sharon as if she were six feet tall, with a voice according." Polly knew the sweetness, and cuddled up to her, and was n't afraid of the sternness.

"You and the like of you never 'll see it," said Mandy.

A BEAUTIFUL BIRTHDAY

Polly came in the wild rose month, so of course everything had wild roses for decoration. When the fish course was through, the table was cleared, all but a big ring or wreath of wild roses that Margery and Tom fetched from the tent and set on the middle of the white cloth. Then Mandy appeared with her big white cake (baked in a milk-pan), and all hands helped to lower it carefully to its place of honor in the middle of the ring. Then they all stood and sang a little song (composed by Tom for the occasion) beginning,



"Here 's to Polly,
Gay and jolly,
We 're so glad that she is ten!"

"So 'm I!" chimed in Polly, fervently, and then they all laughed, and after that the song did n't amount to much. But

the presents did, and every one, as usual, was "just the very i-den-ti-cal thing she wanted most."

"Polly is the most everlastingly grateful little thing!" laughed Tom. "I believe if anybody were to present her with a snapping-turtle, she would find out that it was the very thing she had been pining for — 'honest Injun,' too; no make-believe about Polly!"

At last the feast was through, even the dishes of strawberries and cream that it "topped off" with, and then Tom "took his little sister in tow" as he expressed it, and they began a long "walk-and-talk," as they had done for years and years, whenever he came home from college or anywhere.

"Take a stroll, Polly?"

"Let's have a ramble, Tom!"

"We both spoke together!" giggled Polly. "You want a roll, and I want a stramble!"

"Stramble it is, then!" said Tom, hooking her short arm into his long one, and starting off on an exploring tour round the place.

Wally, who knew what was up, tagged after them like a little dog. He was so full of little chuckles and giggles over what he knew she would soon be finding that Tom shook his fist at him behind his back, and when that did n't do any good turned square round and made up the most astonishing face, all puckers and wrinkles and black eyebrows, a face fit to make anybody look like that king of England who never smiled again.

All at once Polly lifted her eyes and saw a green-painted sign nailed to the outstanding limb of a gnarly old apple-tree growing in the side-yard.

"F-A-I-R-Y–L-A-N-D," she spelled out, wonderingly. "Well, I 'd like to know — oh, my! do see the dear little steps up the tree" —

"I nailed 'em!" shrieked Wally.

"That 's how my hammer and nails got rusted out in the rain, was it?" said father, who was also "tagging."

"And the little rooms up in all the branches," said Polly. "There 's a kitchen, and my old black Dinah sweeping up the room! Who did do such a cute, perfectly lovely thing?"

"Mamma helped some," said Wally, generously. "But you 've got to climb up it. You have n't seen the parlor nor half the rooms yet."

"'Course I 'll climb," said Polly; "but who painted that beautiful green sign? You never did that, Wally Plummer — or did you?" She was prepared to believe anything, everybody was so lovely to her, even though Wally had never been known to paint anything but his trousers, and he always did that when painting, no matter how big a piece of paper was given to him.

"No, Mr. Mooney did that, but I held the nails while he hammered it," said Wally, anxious to claim what credit belonged to him.

"He 's just a gem of a man," said Polly, gratefully. "I 'll tell you, Wally, let 's you and I go and get a great, big, huge bouquet of the nicest flowers we can find, and go over to his house with a card on it marked, '*A slight token of our appresheration.*' "

"All right," said Wally, "I 'll help."

"If you 'll help, too, Tom," said Polly, "we shall do it a good deal more quick-erer."

"I? — oh, yes! Or, let 's see, little one! I 've got to run up to the city on that 2.30 train, and if I do n't catch it I sha' n't get it."

"O Tom!"

"Now you need n't go to 'O Tom'-ing, for you 've just got to stay with me and

play in your apple-tree house, now it 's made ! " cried Wally in alarm, remembering all at once the goodies stowed away in that apple-tree pantry. Mamma had helped him fix the cunningest little wooden box with a sliding lid, and nobody else knew what delicious things were hidden in it.

" It would n't be a bad way to end up her day," said Tom, thoughtfully. " I 've got to run into the publishing house and see if I can get the chance to send in some little things regularly this year again, same as I did last, you know."

" Polly would bother. Better not try it."

" I 'm not sure she would, mother. I won't stop more than a minute or two, anyway. On with your hat, little sister, if mother is willing, and you and I will have a fine trip to celebrate."

Polly went hop-skipping up-stairs, singing " You and I, You and I " to the tune of " Lightly Row," and Margery might just

about as well have tried to dress a jumping-jack in full operation as her little sister Polly in her present state of mind. However, a clean white dress was soon buttoned on to her somehow, and two whisks of the brush had to do for that day's hair-dressing. In another minute her hat was on, and father had the horse harnessed for a ride to the station.

"What have you got in that bag?" asked Tom, eying the Boston bag that she carried on her arm.

"My handkerchief, and my money-purse, and a book to read."

"What do you want of a book!"

"Travelers always have a book to read. It's when you get tired of the scenery."

"Oh!"

The car was hot and dusty, but Polly was furnished with an immense palm-leaf fan when the boy came through with a refreshing supply of them, and there was

the scenery, and the book in the bottom of her bag. Nothing troubled her, and Tom was uncomplaining, even when she brushed the end of his nose with her fan, and knocked his nice sharp pencil onto the floor and broke the point off, and begged half of his writing-pad for purposes of her own, and gave him a five-minute search for their tickets which she had fanned into the aisle and never noticed. For all that, he "drew the line" at tickets, and kindly but firmly demanded the troublesome fan. She was just going to get her book out, when she noticed two children racing unsteadily up and down the aisle. They were having a good time, but their mother, with a little baby in her arms, was plainly anxious. Every time the car lurched, it seemed as if one or the other of them must pitch head first out of the open door. Suddenly the boy stopped and stared at Polly. She was holding up her two hands, the ten fingers

twinkling invitingly in ten funny ruffs of white paper, made from what was left of Tom's note-pad.

"Come on, Elizabuff!" the boy called, climbing up into the empty seat in front of him, and kneeling in it so as to face Polly. "Le 's see her put dresses on her fingers!"

When the note-paper was gone, they used a yellow time-table that Tom found in his pocket, and then he obligingly tore long strips of newspaper and helped them make Jacob's-ladders and lamplighters, which the children stuck all over their curls till they looked as if they had been playing the game of the Ten-Horned Ambassador. Before they were tired of all this, the train gave a warning whistle, and people began gathering up bags and bundles, and the happy mother across the aisle beckoned her children back to her, and they were all at the end of their journey.

"Oh, I think traveling is beautiful!"

said Polly with a big sigh, as she trotted along by Tom's side. "Only, but I did n't get to read my book any."

"That's because you had so much scenery to attend to," said Tom, dryly.

"I'll leave you here at the door a minute," he said, as he signaled the elevator which was to take him up to the editor's office, "while I run in and see Dr. Harvard two minutes, and then I'll come right down for you. Wait here, that's a good girl."

"No, indeed, Tom!" said Polly, earnestly, clutching at him as he was about to disappear in the elevator, "I've heard too much about being carried off by brigands and things to let you go out of my sight in any such a place as this! I'm a-going with you."

"Well, all right," said Tom, half-vexed, "only I did n't know you meant to stick to me like a porous plaster. Come along,

dear. But remember, do n't chatter to me or anybody. Editors are busy people and hate to be bothered."

A BEAUTIFUL BIRTHDAY

"Do you have to walk on your tippy-toes in a neditor's office?"

"Well, so to speak!" said Tom, unblushingly.

"What would they do to you if you should speak out loud?"

"Well, 't is n't best to try it. You never can tell what an editor will do."

Thus prepared, Polly went into the office of the editor-in-chief with a heart that went pitapat, especially as her "new boots" would squeak in spite of her. There was nothing very ogreish about the room or its furnishing. As for the editor himself, all she could see of him was his back, and you can't tell whether a man is cross or pleasant just by so much. Polly was frightened, but heroic.

"I won't cry! I won't cry!" she said

to herself, winking back the tears bravely and squeezing Tom's finger so tight that he gave her a warm little pressure back again. "Mamma says little girls and big girls ought to learn to keep their tears for the conclusion of their own room, but — I wish 't I had n't come to a neditor's office!"

Just then the editor turned round.

"Oh, ho, Mr. Plummer! That you?" he said, cordially enough. "We can use a few more of those 'True Incidents' such as you wrote us for our incident page. A package or so each month — well-worked-up things of that sort always welcome if they 're what we — happen to want! Ah, who 's this? Your little sister? *Here* 's a seat for you, Pussy!"

A look at his face decided Polly to accept his invitation, and the next minute she was sitting on his knee hearing all about his vacation, and how the children

had "swarmed all over him," and called him the "bow'n-arrer man," because in an evil hour he had made a bow and arrow for one little fellow, who had published it abroad and brought him plenty of custom; in proof of which he showed her his knife, one blade broken short off in the service.

So for three or four minutes, as if there were no such thing as business that a child might interfere with, then, with a pat and a push, he said, "There, good-bye to you!" and she and Tom went out of the office, business and pleasure both attended to, and the world not more than five minutes older.

"There 's one more office, Polly," Tom said. "You do n't mind?"

"Oh, no, indeed!" chirped Polly. "I *like* neditors. Come on!" she cried, catching his hand and actually going into this second one with a hop-skip that would have scandalized her mother.

Much the same experience awaited her in this room. Polly found all the people in her world good to her on her birthday.

On the way home she gave Tom a piece of her mind.

"I do n't see where you spect to go to!" she observed, frankly. "The whoppery things you told me 'bout neditors! Now *I* think your Dr. Harvard is *awfully* nice —petickelarly the way he puts his arm around you."

"That other one showed you pictures."

"Yes, they were the *cutest* pickshures! He said he had a little girl at home not so big as me. He 's quite a large man — at least, up-and-down ways. I do n't know what it is exactly — something or other about them — I think you can always tell business men, somehow, they are apt to be so nice to children."

A "CHILDREN'S VISITOR"

CHAPTER IX

A "Children's Visitor"

ALL the long afternoon Wally played lonesomely in the Apple-tree House, and wished Polly back. Twenty times he went to that tempting hidden cupboard and sniffed at the good bread-and-meat sandwiches, and then slid the cover on hard, resolved to wait till Polly could come and eat them with him. Except just one little nip of the end of a long stick of striped candy, he left the goodies all untouched, and that is saying a good deal for greedy little Wally. Mandy often said that

Wally's "sweet tooth" made her "more trouble than all the rest of his upper-and-unders."

A "CHILDREN'S VISITOR"

Toward night mother was glad to see a neighbor's boy sidle up under the tree, and, after a little talk, climb the queer, straggly ladder. Mrs. Plummer was always pleased when her boys and girls found other children to play with — the more the merrier; and she never made too much parade of watching them, either.

"Good Christian boys and girls," she used to say to them, "fit for Christian children to play with. That 's enough to tell you. You know a good boy as far as you can see him — if you do n't, wait till he begins to talk. Then you can tell."

She settled herself comfortably to her sewing when she saw the two boys together; but three or four minutes later, happening to look up, she saw the little visitor leaving very suddenly. He was

A "CHILDREN'S VISITOR"

not exactly being kicked out by Wally, but that young gentleman was standing at the top of the tree-ladder with a look and gesture which were plainly threatening. The strange boy seemed to feel convinced that he would better get out of that tree as quickly as his short legs would let him.

Mrs. Plummer rapped on the window with her thimble.

"What did you send him home for, Wally?"

Wally held up three fingers solemnly.

"He swore *three times in accession!*" he said, impressively. "'Course I'd send him home after that!"

"Those poor little Price children!" sighed mamma to herself. But she did not say anything out loud to Wally just then. She hardly ever talked till she was ready to do something.

The minute Polly came home, a little before sundown, Wally pounced on her to

come out to the Apple-tree House and have what he called a "party," meaning things in the wooden box with the sliding cover. On the way he told her about Jimmy Price, and the reason they were not playing together. Polly was halfway up the ladder, but she instantly began to move the other way, and in another minute was over the wall and running up the weedy walk to the Prices' back door.

"Can Jimmy come over to our party?" she asked, breathlessly. "It's out in the apple-tree, and there's samwidges and cookies and a little saucer pie apiece, for I don't want any!"

"P'rhaps! I dunno. If the baby don't want to be pacified. I don't know but he can. You can go ask him. He's in the front room there."

"Will you, Jimmy?" asked Polly, in her "coaxy" tone. She had seen his yellow head at the crack of the door, and knew

that she did not need to repeat her invitation.

"Dunno. Wally won't want me to."

"O Jimmy! what did you and Wally get to squabbling over? You 're always at it."

"I sweared a swear."

"I know it," said Polly, as honest as he was. "But, Jimmy, you 're *awful* sorry, are n't you? And you would n't do it again for ten million dollars, would you? Say yes — oh, please do! — for I want you so much to come to our party, and of course I can't ask anybody that 'taketh His name in vain,' and you 're such good fun that I can't leave you out, either! Now say you 're sorry!"

Jimmy nodded. "'Course," he said, and Polly was satisfied. So was mother when she called Polly to the window and heard all about it.

"Got to go home and pacify the baby

now!" said Jimmy, gruffly, when they had eaten up most of the "party," and the sunset was fading.

A "CHILDREN'S VISITOR"

"Is she sick?" asked Polly.

"No, just plain cross. She 's got some teeth coming."

"Poor little thing!"

Jimmy scowled and kicked something.

"A fellow can't go anywheres, ball games nor swimming nor anything, when he has to tend a baby."

"O Jimmy!" cried Polly, clapping her hands suddenly, "would n't you like — would n't your mother like — to have somebody come in some afternoon and play with the baby, so you could be let off and go and do what you 're a mind to?"

"Did once. Called herself a Lady Visitor. But the baby squalled every minute."

"She would n't cry with me," said Polly. "I 'd be a 'Children's Visitor!' Is n't that a nice name? I never thought of it

A "CHILDREN'S VISITOR"

before. Winky 's got a new name. The doctor gave it to him. He is the doctor's assistant, you know. So he calls him 'Doctor Winky.' But I have n't had any name. I like this one."

"Wish 't you 'd come every day in the week," said Jimmy, frankly. "And begin to-morrow."

"Well, I will pretty often," promised Polly. "But, you see, Dr. Varney comes a good many days, and then I go where he wants me."

Dr. Varney was much pleased with the name Polly had found or invented for herself, and adopted it very seriously. The tired mothers with teething babies, as well as the long-suffering nurses in the weary hospital ward, began to call her by it. Polly and her cat came to be as much depended on as the doctor himself. The only trouble was there were too many of the children sick and ailing at once.

"There is n't enough of me to go round," said Polly, telling the girls, Dorothy and Susie and the others, about it one day when they were playing out in the Apple-tree House.

"How do you do it?" asked Dorothy. "Why can't we help?"

"Oh, you could, *lovely!* I guess that little expressman's boy would be glad if you would take turns going to see him, one of us every day of the week. He is so lonesome! And I know his mother would. Last week I went and read him a story, and dressed Winky up in dolly-clothes and had fun a whole afternoon, and his mother got a chance to do a whole big washing. I 'm making a scrap-book for him. Do n't you want to help? Mandy will let us have the dining-room table, and make us some paste, if we promise to clear up afterwards."

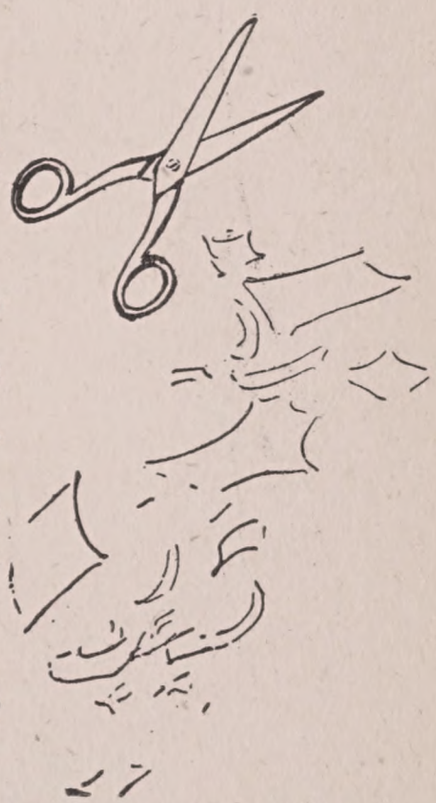
The girls thought it would be great fun,

and all scrambled down, and in a few minutes were busy as bees at the useful new play Polly had suggested. First, each chose the particular kind of scrap-book she would make.

"Mine's going to be a menagerie one," said Dotty; "cows and horses and little squealy pigs and hens and ducks and dogs and elephants and hippitypotamases."

"Well, then, you can have all the 'Dumb Animals' to cut up. Susie and I will choose some other kind."

"And I want to choose some 'nother kind!" cried Wally in a shrill voice of injury.



"Of course. How would you like carts and carriages — every sort of team there is in the world? His father is an express-man, and I should think he would like that kind of a scrap-book most better than any other kind."

"All right. Is a wheelbarrow a cart or

a carriage? I want a naughtymobile to begin with."

A "CHILDREN'S VISITOR"

"You can find any quantity of 'em in this catalogue I found in papa's waste-basket. What you going to take, Susie?"

"I 'm going to make a house. Give a room to a page and cut out furniture from the advertisements — oh, you will see!"

"Is n't that beautiful! And now I 'm going to beat the whole lot of you! Give me what you have left, will you? Any old thing anybody else does n't want just fits in for me. I am going to have a country store of my scrap-book. Papa was reading a story to mamma last night, and he read about one that had everything in it, from a humming-bird to a second-hand pulpit; and that 's what mine is going to be. And here is the storekeeper, and here are some customers. I 'm going to stand them all around the store, looking at things, and outside — this is the piazza

page — there will be some funny-looking farmer-men sitting on old barrels and tipped-up chairs, just the way they do down to Mr. Asa's at the Corners. Won't it be fun? See who will get most done before supper."

This was the beginning of a regular scrap-book mission. People had made scrap-books before, but not just like these. When Margery came in and saw what they were up to, she brought out a pile of old magazines and set to work to help them, and the next day Tom paid a visit to a big furniture store and begged all their sample catalogues with fine, large illustrations of every sort of chair and table and sofa and cook-stove that ever went into a house. Susie had enough to make a dozen scrap-book houses. For Dotty, there were some old animal books up in the attic which were all in tatters, and they helped her menagerie out amazingly. Even Wally

was not forgotten, for an envelope came to him by mail from some unknown source containing dozens of "teams" for his livery-stable. Tom looked as surprised when they were shown to him as if he had never seen a carriage before.

A "CHILDREN'S VISITOR"

While they were still busy at the scrap-books, and long before they had any idea of getting tired of them, Doctor Varney came to get Polly and her cat to make another visit to the Children's Hospital.

"To-morrow? That 's the Fourth of July!" said Polly, thinking of a plan she and Tom had talked over for next day's celebration.

"I know it," said the doctor. "See what I 've got to stick up at the head of each bed!"

He opened a package and shook out a gay bundle of flags, all the same size, not too big for weak little folks to handle. The "Ohs!" and the "Ahs!" that came

from Polly and her friends seemed to fully satisfy him.

"Thought you would like 'em," he said, rolling them up again. "Who wants to go and help distribute?"

"O Doctor Varney! could anybody go but Polly? We thought she was the 'Children's Visitor.'"

"So she is — the only real original. And Dr. Winky is my first assistant. But that does n't hinder her having any number of helpers. I borrowed a 'democrat' on purpose to take you all in."

"You must n't go empty-handed," said Margery, when the doctor had gone. "Make them have a beautiful Fourth of July, with something to keep to remember it by. Polly says there are nineteen little children in the ward where she goes. Look over all your playthings, and see if you cannot find nineteen pretty gifts for them."

"All Fourth of July things?"

"Why, perhaps! Little toy drums"—

"Things to make a noise?"

"No, I would n't. But there are such cunning little red-white-and-blue souvenirs, do n't you know, and perhaps you can find little candy-boxes and tie them with red-white-and-blue ribbon. Such things will be better for sick children than pistols and firecrackers."

"Margery Elizabeth Plummer!"

"Well, dear?" said Margery, smiling at Polly's earnestness.

"I've got nineteen cents, all my own!"

"That 's a good deal of money."

"And there are just nineteen boys and girls in that room. Now if that is n't a providence! You can buy nineteen striped red-and-white sticks of candy for a cent apiece, and tie a little knot of blue ribbon on the end, and there 's a Fourth-o'-July present for every single one!"

"What a nice, bright idea!" said Mar-

gery, smiling at Polly's notion of a "providence." "You can just do it with your nineteen cents, for I have a lot of blue ribbon up-stairs that I will give you, and you can all go and get the candy right off, and come back and tie the ribbons to-night. I will give you a nice box to carry them in. You want to get every single thing done to-night that you can do, so as to be all ready when Dr. Varney comes for you. It would n't be right to keep him waiting, and, besides, he would n't wait for you!"

When Dr. Varney did come next morning, they were all ready and waiting.

"You may have the flags!" the doctor told Wally. "I 'll go round with you when we get there and help you put them in their places. Here, Susie, is a box of nobody-knows-what that I expect they will all be fighting over, because the playthings are all different, and every blessed child of the lot will think he wants some other one

A "CHILDREN'S VISITOR."

than the one you 've given him. No matter. That 's your lookout. I wash my hands of the whole business. Use your judgment — the best you 've got — and then see that they keep the peace over it. Dotty, child, what is there for you to distribute? Oh, I see! Polly has turned over her striped 'providences' to you. That 's all *right*, Polly! You need n't go to blushing over it if Margery did tell me. The ones to blush are the blind people who have eyes, yet never see any 'providences.' Now are you all ready? Hold on, what has little Pollywog to carry for her own part of the program? Oh, the cat! — Dr. Winky. He is worth more than all the rest of it put together. And a patriotic ribbon, I declare! Tie a knot of it on his tail, why do n't you? I would!"

"She 's come! she 's come!"

"The kitty-girl has come!"

"My first!"

"No, me!"

These were some of the cries and whispers which ran from cot to cot as Polly followed the doctor into the big white room with the little white beds in it. The sight of the other children made them a little shy at first, but when Wally began to shake out the pretty "flower-flags," as the Chinese call them, and when Dotty handed round the sticks of candy, and when Susie took the cover off the plaything-box, nobody could feel bashful or anything but interested any more. Some of the children leaned half way out of their beds to see what was going on, and it was pretty to hear their little squeals and gurgles of delight when their own particular presents were handed out to them. Fighting? Not a bit of it! They were all too happy to fight. One great part of the pleasure was *not* to have the presents all alike, for then there was the fun of comparing.

The doctor stood near the door looking down the long room, with its rows of beds and the fluttering flags above them. There were all sorts and kinds of children there — yellow-haired little German babies, two or three olive-skinned Italians, a little Polish boy with a queer name, over in the bed next to the wall, Swedes and English and Americans and Irish. The doctor looked at the black and brown and yellow heads, and something in his throat seemed to hurt him. This was their part in the blessings of a free country. To his thought the waving flower-flags seemed promising care and protection.

"How many know 'America'?" he called out suddenly.

Everybody in the room was saying "I," or it sounded like it.

"Sing it!" commanded the doctor.

All over the room it began, in the queer little shaky voices: "My country, 't is of

thee!" The doctor could not stand a great deal of it. He stopped it presently, and set them to singing "Star-spangled Banner" and other tunes, Polly leading off, with the others to help, as long as they had breath to sing. Little Black-eyes with the hurt foot seemed to like the sound of the singing. As long as they stayed, they would hear her break out now and then, as she waved her tiny flag,

"'T is the 'tar-pangled bangle,
Oh, long may it wave!"

But the best of it came at the last, as it ought to. Polly never told the doctor what Tom had put into her hand at starting. She lifted the cover just enough to "peek," and the sight made her hold her breath with delight. The trouble with carrying a cunning little kitty to amuse sick children was that the little sick children cried so when it had to go away.

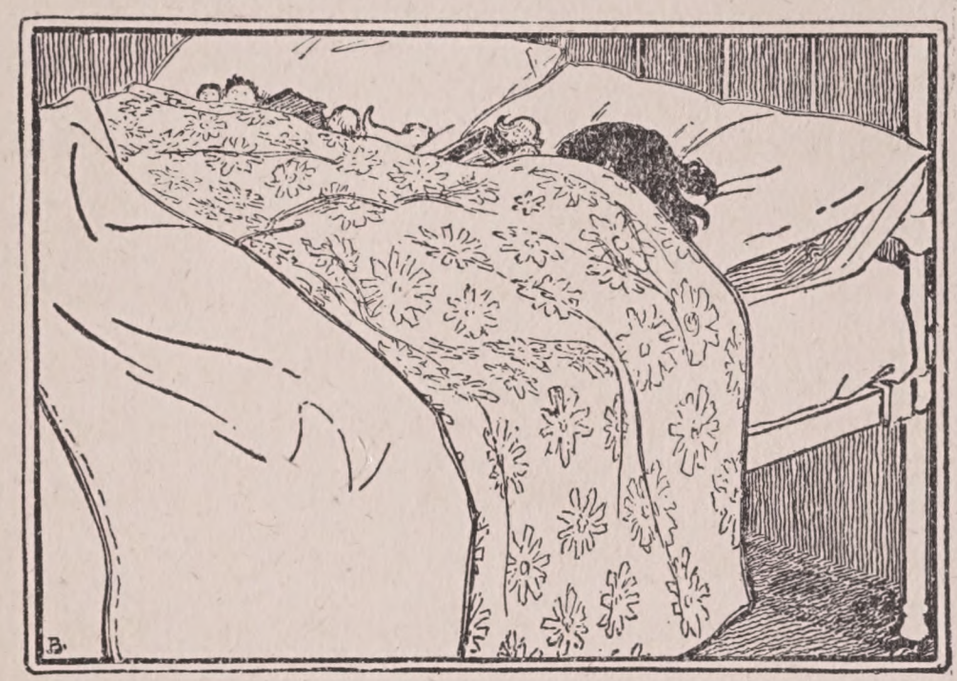
Polly had told Tom about this. He looked thoughtful, but did not make any answer just then. When he went to the city a few days afterward, he brought home with him a Brownie camera, and the little box held a score or so of the "cutest" little cat-pictures you ever dreamed of. So as the children said good-bye after their beautiful Fourth-of-July visit that day, Polly softly slipped a picture of Winky into each tiny hand. When the nurses went the rounds that night to see if all were sleeping, more than one hot little wasted fist still clutched the picture tightly.

A "CHILDREN'S VISITOR"

"It 's something to hold, you see, Tom," explained Polly, as she thanked him. "You know you always have to have something to go to sleep with. I take my stone dog and my Bible and your pickshure — the one in the red velvet frame — and a few of my dolls, of course not all of them, and" —

"Does anybody else sleep with you, my dear?"

"Well, Margery, when she is home. But she userally clears her side out a little 'fore she gets into it."



AN INTERRUPTION

CHAPTER X

An Interruption

OBODY ever knew just how it happened. Polly was up in the tree cuddling the cat, as usual, and talking — also as usual. If anybody ever saw Polly when she was n't talking, it must have been when she was asleep.

"Next week school begins, and then where will *you* be? There won't be any little Polly-mamma to play with you, and make poke bonnets of your ears and see that the old tiger-cats do n't get you. Polly will be all gone away off, and — oh, say, Mandy, have you begun to think about lunch-boxes?

You know school begins Monday, and I'm a sixth-grader!"

AN INTERRUPTION

"Humph!" said Mandy, who was out picking up apples for an apple-pie; "all I've got to say is, I hope sixth-graders don't get up any bigger appetites than fifth-graders. You kept me cooking all last year solid."

"I'll make you out a list," said Polly, beginning to scramble down to a lower limb where she kept paper and pencil. "I want real nice things this year. Good" —

"Nice bread and butter and a plenty of it," said Mandy.

"Wholesome chock'lit ikklaire," giggled Polly, who knew she wasn't going to get what she asked for. "You just wait a minute."

Polly scribbled away without much regard for spelling, and presently tossed down a "list" of lunch-box goodies, which Mandy straightened herself up to

read, with now and then a dry chuckle, which did Polly's heart good as she leaned down out of the branches to look at her.

Chock'lit ikklaire (an item which would have headed any bill-of-fare made out by Polly)

Angel cake	Appel turnovers
Sweet pikels	Cokanutt cakes
Pikel limes	Blowny sossig

and Neggs

Mandy turned to go, and Polly leaned out of the tree to call after her, laughingly,

"And marbul cake, and"—

As I said, nobody knew how it happened. She leaned a little bit too far. Mandy turned sharply as she heard something come crashing down through the branches and strike the ground with a dull thud; and it was she who picked Polly up in her long, strong arms and carried her into the house as if she had been a baby. Tom had been watching from an upper window and opened the door as Mandy reached the

piazza. Then, while Polly was laid tenderly on the low, broad lounge for mother to look after, he fled for the doctor. Luckily, Dr. Varney was in his office, and lost no time in coming over.

AN INTERRUPTION

"Hurts, does it?" he said, twisting her leg in this way and that as if he did n't care two straws whether it hurt or not.

"Yes," said Polly, the tears starting.

"Thought so. Step on it."

"I *can't!*" screamed Polly, falling all in a heap on the sofa, after one obedient effort.

"Well, you need n't," said the doctor, beginning to swathe the puffed ankle tenderly. "You 've got a nice little sprain to take care of, but no bones broken. Hot water and plenty of it. Shook you up pretty well all over, did it? Oh, yes, you 've got a bruise or two, but I 'll fix you all up by to-morrow so handsome you will want your picture taken."

"Like Jack and Jill, 'with vinegar and

brown paper'!" said Polly, faintly, trying to joke, though her ankle felt worse every second.

"You are n't hurt enough to cry over, Polly," said Tom, bound to keep her courage up, "but I 'm going to weep with those that weep. Boo-hoo! boo-hoo-oo — *oo!* O dear me — oh-*oh*–oh–OH!"

Winky looked doubtfully from one face to another as Tom began his lamentations, and finally concluding that something terrible must be the matter with his little mistress, ran to her lounge and put his two front feet on the edge of it, and, looking in her face, gave utterance to one heartrending meow.

"Beats me all out," laughed Tom, heartily. "No use for me to try to be touching when Winky is around. Well, then, I 'll make you laugh. Tell you what, Polly-woggle, I have ten days more to spend at home before my work begins,

and I'll devote that time to you. Play you were a champion ball-player and got your ankle twisted, your nose broken, your teeth knocked out, three arms torn out of their sockets and your skull cracked till everybody could see there was n't any brains in. A fellow would feel ashamed to go on a 'team' and not lose a finger or two — get hurt worse than you have, anyway. Wait! I'll fix you up."

AN INTERRUPTION

So it happened that when the doctor made his second visit next morning, he was a little puzzled at the looks of his patient. One eye was entirely closed, and an immense black circle all around made it look as if "mortification had set in," as Tom suggested; a large white bandage was tied round the left temple, her right arm was in a sling, and both feet, bandaged separately, rested on a hassock.

"Humph!" said the doctor. "Done in water-color, eh? Pretty bad-looking eye

that is. Been having a fight with the door, have n't you? My *nose* always gets the worst of it in such an encounter. Had n't you better tell me which foot you want 'treated'?"

"The well one!" said Polly, demurely.

"Good!" said the doctor, heartily. "Well, well, you 're a brave one!"

Somehow it did n't seem to hurt half so much if you laughed about it, and Tom did as he promised, and devoted himself to making her laugh. He taught Winky to "beg" like a dog, to carry sticks in his mouth, to roll over and over when bidden, and a dozen tricks which Polly declared would make him ten times more valuable when the time came to go out again as angels of mercy to the little sick children of the neighborhood.

By the third morning, it was the doctor who looked sober when he came in to see how the foot was getting along.

"Who's pretty sick?" asked Tom, after studying his face a few minutes.

AN INTERRUPTION

"Nobody!" said the doctor, shortly, and then he laughed. "I am missing my little assistant here. 'Children cry for her.' Can't get 'em to take their medicine. All I hear from morning to night is 'I wa-a-ant Pol-ly!'"

The doctor's tone was so funny that Polly burst out laughing, but she, too, grew grave presently.

"Poor little things!" she said. "I suppose they do miss me coming with Winky."

"They certainly do," said the doctor.

"You could have Winky," suggested Polly.

"I suppose I *might* go round with a medicine-box in one hand and a cat in the other."

"Would n't you look funny?" laughed Polly, merrily. "After all, I suppose he

would n't go with you without me. I 'll have to think up a way. Tom will help me."

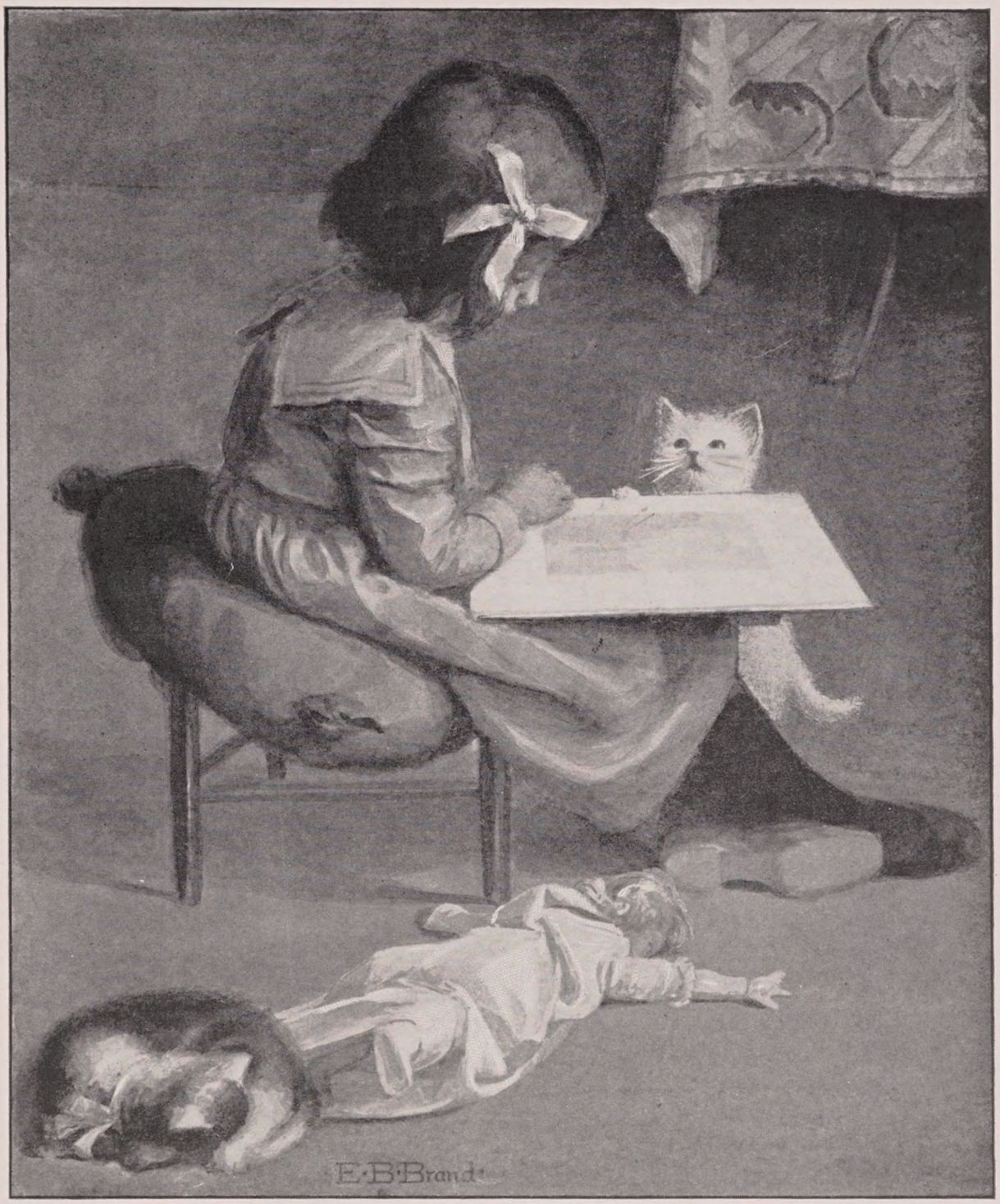
Tom was willing to help, but even he was unable to "see a way" soon enough to suit impatient Polly. Some thoughts are like the wedges of wood, that in early times, it is said, used to be driven into crevices of rocks and left to swell with rains. In time the solid rock was split apart just by the pushing of that tiny wedge. Tom said good-bye to Polly and went away to his work with a sort of an "entering wedge" of an idea as to that Amusement Bureau, which Dr. Varney sometimes spoke of so wistfully. All sorts of obstacles stood in the way; but the wedge was there. He knew the rocks would have to yield.

Polly was very lonely after he left. Margery was not at home, and the little "shut-in" sat in her big, sunny room many

AN INTER-RUPTION

an hour tasting the tediousness which she had so sweetly tried to relieve for others, for even Winky could not make time pass quickly for her all her days, and mother was a very busy woman. Worst of all, papa was away on his vacation. Mother had insisted on his going, even though it was without her, and he was spending a week or two at the seashore. Polly knew just where, and often sat and thought of him, for she had been at the very house before this with papa, and got acquainted with Georgietta, the little daughter of the house.

Wally, too, was more lonesome than ever, for he did not care to stay in with Polly, and Polly could not come out, so he had to go and find his own playmates. He tried to coax Winky to come and play with him, but Winky seemed to prefer to share Polly's imprisonment. Mother said it was too bad, and one day presented Wally



"WHERE SHE SAT BY THE HOUR SHOWING PICTURES TO WINKY."

with a new little kitty of his own, with a dainty blue ribbon tied in a bow round its neck, but after a few days they found it always up in Polly's room curled down near her little cushioned stool where she sat by hours showing pictures to Winky, or telling him old stories. Cats, like babies, have an odd way of knowing who their real lovers are.

Papa's letters were lovely, and he never failed to put in a little note for Polly, and sometimes a whole letter, in her own envelope, to her own address. One day there were two letters, both to "Miss Polly Plummer," one, of course, from papa, and the other, as she soon saw, from her dear Georgietta. From the folds of the pink-violet note-paper dropped out the most beautiful embroidered handkerchief holding a white silk sachet stamped with forget-me-nots.

Polly was quite overcome with delight

at receiving two such pretty letters in one mail. Mamma read them to her first, and then she sat and spelled them over to herself.

AN INTERRUPTION

"How would you like to have a little playmate for a few weeks?" asked mamma, looking up from her own letter.

"I wish I had!" said Polly, forlornly.

"You might write a little note of thanks to Georgietta, and" —

"And? And what?" cried Polly, all a-fire, as her mother hesitated. "Oh, don't stop at 'and.'"

"And ask her to come up here a little while and keep you from being homesick in your own father's house."

"You loveliest mamma! Will you help me to write it?"

"Wait a few minutes till I get back and I will help you."

Polly, listening, heard her go into the study and click away at papa's typewriter.

Pretty soon she came back, and this was the note she handed Polly:

"Georgietta,
My dear friend:—
A short letter
Here I send.
For your pretty
Gift to me,
Here are kisses
One, two, three.

"That nice kerchief
With the posy
I shall use to
Wipe my nosey.
(I 'm a little
Girl, you see,
So my mamma
Writes for me.)

"Mamma says that
I may say,
Come and see me,
Right away.
Stay a week, or
Two or three,—
Oh, how happy
We shall be!

"Darling papa
Is with you,
Down beside the
Ocean blue;
Love to you and
Him from me.
I'm your loving
Polly P."

BETTER THAN MONEY

CHAPTER XI

Better Than Money

XPECT us on the 5 : 10 train Tuesday."

This was the telegram which came to Polly Monday afternoon, and which puzzled her as well as her mother, for neither of them could guess what "us" meant. It could not be papa, for a letter came from him in the night mail telling what he meant to do all that week. Who was coming with Georgietta?

"Well, whoever it is," said mother, hospitably, "we must be ready for them.

I will have Mandy air the best bed, and get out fresh towels and toilet things. They must have misunderstood our invitation. I certainly did not mean to ask any more company while you need so much waiting on. It is too hard on Mandy."

At exactly 5:30 a carriage stopped at the door, and out jumped a nice little girl whom Polly instantly and joyfully recognized as Georgietta, and a fierce-looking black cat which meekly came up the steps after Georgietta when she carelessly called to him to follow her.

"O Georgietta! What's his name?" cried Polly, after the first long kisses and hugs were over.

"Inky."

"Inky and Winky! Didn't you know my cat is Winky? Who ever heard of such a thing!"

"Yes, your papa told me. But mine was named when he was a little bit of a

kitten, because he is so black, and your papa said to bring him, so I did, though my mamma said it was n't very polite, and I do n't know what your mamma will say!"

"She 'll say 'all right,' only — it 's the best bed she is going to put him in!" giggled Polly. "I heard her tell Mandy to get the guest-room ready because 'unexpected company' was coming! Do you s'pose she will put him there?"

With Georgietta's coming, everything was changed. She was a dainty little dark-eyed maiden, a year older than Polly, which Polly thought was very nice because she knew so many more things than Polly did. It was she who planned the "Annual Sale of the Ladies" in behalf of Polly's poor little sick children, at which they sold everything in the house which mother was willing to say she could "spare."

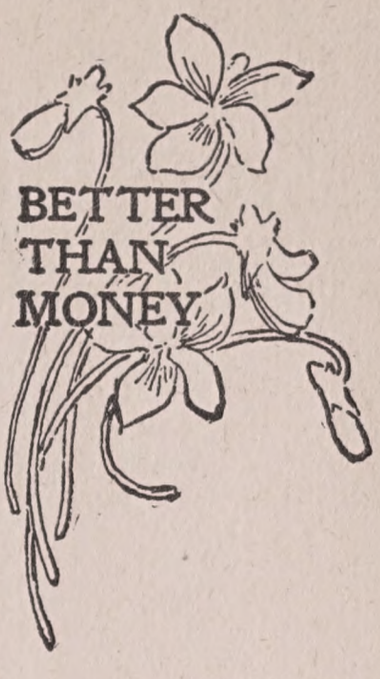
"That will not be much, dear!" she said, sighing to think what a very economical household they were, and how few things they ever had to spare.

"Oh, there *will!*" said Polly, earnestly. "I know any quantity of things — just *piles!*"

"Very well," said mamma, "only show everything to me first," sighing again to think of the work that meant for her, whether they found or did n't find what they wanted.

Susie and Dorothy wanted to help, and brought over an amazing basket of contributions from their house, all of which sold at good prices to appreciative friends and neighbors, who gathered willingly in Polly's chamber showroom, just for the sake of pleasing Polly.

"'T is n't money enough," said Georgietta, counting their pennies and small bits of silver after it was over. She had a pretty



plan in mind, but, like most plans, it called for a pretty handful of money. "Let 's have a cat-show! Where 's Inky?"

Nobody ever needed to say, "Where 's Winky?" for he was always close to Polly. She put out her hand and touched him pettingly, as she said that perhaps Inky might be in the kitchen with Mandy.

He was n't, but Georgietta was not easily discouraged, and went on into the dining-room, where she found the most forlorn-looking boy, sitting on a low stool, with the big black cat gazing steadily and rather reproachfully at him. He could not understand a boy who would n't play with him.

"Why, Inky, what is the matter! Why, Wally, what have you been doing?"

"Nawthin'," said Wally, lifelessly.

"What 's the reason you are n't doing anything?" demanded Georgietta, briskly. "What do you want to do?"

"Nawthin'!" said Wally again, mournfully.

Since Georgietta came he had seen less and less of Polly, and he felt that Georgietta was somehow to blame for his having no one to play with.

"Well, you do!" she cried, catching up Inky, and snatching at the same time one of Wally's limp hands. "Come along. We 're going to have a cat party, and we want you to help. We 've got to have a boy to go errands."

"Truly?" asked Wally, brightening.

"Honest. We want your cat, too. Where is he?"

"Up in Polly's room, 'course. Everything is up in Polly's room."

"Well, you 're going to be up in Polly's

room, too, so do n't look as if you had lost your best friend. Come and get the notices and the tickets."

Georgietta had a sweet little childish voice, like Polly, and the cat-show was to include several vocal duets by "Jolly and Porgietta" (as the doctor persisted in calling them, pretending he could not get their names right), an "instrumental piece" or two, some "speakings" by Wally and the neighbor girls, and no end of funny cat tricks by Inky and Winky. These attractions were all duly set forth in the program, which Wally was ordered to carry around and show at every place where he went to sell a ticket. While he was gone, the girls improved the time for a busy rehearsal at home. Father was back from his vacation, but he never minded what they did up in Polly's room, not even if they left the door open. He was not a nervous man, and liked to hear the merry

chatter and murmur of children's voices while he was working. He was smiling to himself as a shrill voice was heard declaring that the next number to be *denounced* on the program was a piece entitled "Grandpa's Schottische" by Miss Polly Plummer, when the outer door opened, and Dr. Varney sent in word by Mandy that he would like to see the minister a moment.

"It 's the expressman's little boy," said the doctor, in a low voice. "He died last night."

"Oh!" said the minister, sorrowfully. "Something new, was n't it?"

"Got cold," said the doctor, briefly. "These people do n't know how to take care of a patient. Mother off all day — had to be. Crawled out of bed and waited on himself, and then fever set in. They want you, of course."

"I 'll come. They never come near me, but that does n't make any difference."

"Of course not. And, by the way, can you bring some of your singers? The man, poor fellow, has taken a notion that he wants a certain thing sung — 'Safe — safe' — oh, yes! 'safe in the arms of Jesus.' Something of that sort. He says your little Polly used to sing it to the boy a good deal, days when she came to see him. Better not mention anything to Polly, perhaps. I told him she was n't out of her room yet."

"Polly *knows*, Dr. Varney!" called a sweet, distressed voice from up-stairs. "I could n't help hearing."

"Too bad!" muttered the doctor.

"Will you please tell that poor man I 'm sorry his little boy had to go to Jesus so quick? And tell" —

But the doctor was gone, and Polly told the rest of it to her papa. He went at once to try to find some "singers." But that was not an easy matter. The volunteer choir was out of town, scattered here

and there at seaside and mountain, and the few remaining ones who could sing were far too bashful to try to sing alone even to ease a father's heart at his little baby's funeral.

"What did he say when you told him we should have to get along without singing?" Mr. Plummer asked next morning when the doctor came in to see Polly.

"The mother seemed to feel worse than he did about it. She said she should 'kind o' feel somehow as if the baby was just drowsing off to sleep if she could hear that tune a-going. So many times she had heard Polly rockin' and hummin' it.' Land o' liberty! Wish *I* knew one note from another. I'd do something, if I had to whistle it, before she should have to go without it."

"She sha'n't have to go without it, papa!" spoke up Polly, suddenly. "I'll sing it — Georgietta and I will."

"Oh, no, dear. You can't walk out, and then, besides" —

"She can be carried," said the doctor, warmly.

"She 's no singer. It might seem strange."

"That 's what they all say — 'It seems.' Who cares how it seems?" answered the doctor, almost angrily.

"Oh, no, I sha' n't mind how it 'seems,'" said Polly, innocently. "I used to sing it to Robbie, all right, so I guess I can. And there 'll be Georgietta to help me. I shall think about Robbie and not mind about the people."

It made Polly catch her breath a little to come into the dark room, among the black-robed people. Dr. Varney himself lifted her out of the carriage and set her down close beside her papa, with Georgietta next. When the time came to sing the little hymn, they both stood up, Polly

leaning lightly with one hand on her papa's knee to support herself, and perhaps to gain a little courage. The words floated out sweetly and clearly into all the other rooms, even when Georgietta began to cry in the middle of the second verse, and sat down unable to help any longer. Polly sang on and never thought of crying, till all at once, in the last chorus, a sudden thought of the warm little head she had so often cosied made a dry sob come up in her throat and the sound would n't come, though she tried to make it.

"Safe in the arms of Jesus,"

she sang, and then she stood still so long that papa patted the little hand gently and made her sit down, while the service went on and was ended.

"I spoilt it! I spoilt it!" cried Polly, crying in good earnest, with her head on her mother's neck, when they were fairly

at home and they had carried her up to her room to rest on the sofa. "And I — we meanted to do it so nice — and then I could n't sing it through!"

"You spoiled nothing, my baby!" said papa, tenderly, coming up the stairs. "That poor man thought you stopped there on purpose, just to let him have that happy thought to think of. He told me so, before I came home."

"That 's nice," said Polly, wearily. She was pretty tired, and things seemed rather disappointing. "We meanted to earn lots of money and make Christmas boxes and things, but I guess we can't. Georgietta is always thinking up the loveliest plans, but you have to have so much money."

"There are ever so many things better than money!" said papa, warmly. "Loving people, and being kind and helpful and sorry for them when they are in trouble,

and ready to do anything you can to make them happy, no matter whether it is easy or not — such things are worth more to poor, troubled hearts than a bagful of gold dollars. Money is all well enough if you have it, but you gave this poor father and mother something better than money, and he told me something that made your papa very happy — he says he is 'coming to my church some after this, so as to learn how to be safe, too, like Robbie.'"

"I'm so glad!" said Polly, and they tucked her up on the sofa and left her, for they rightly judged that she had had excitement enough for one day.

Winky crept out of his hiding-place behind the curtain after they were gone, and when mother looked in just before supper, he had climbed on a hassock, and with one soft paw was trying to coax his little mistress to wake up and play with him.

"AND WITH ONE SOFT PAW WAS TRYING TO COAX HIS LITTLE MISTRESS TO WAKE UP AND PLAY WITH HIM." Page 188.

THE EUROPE LADY

CHAPTER XII

The Europe Lady

IX or seven days before Christmas the loveliest thing happened — something that set little Polly's feet prancing, and the minister's heart dancing, and the doctor's eyes twinkling, and the door-bells a-tinkling, and all the people in the neighborhood to wondering "what on earth that little Polly Plummer and her cat were up to now." If the truth were only known, however, neither Polly nor Winky knew anything about it, and were as much surprised as anybody. And yet, as you will

see, the neighbors were right in thinking that somehow or other those two were at the bottom of it.

Wally had been told to "tend door" that morning. Mother and Mandy were just as busy as they could be about real Christmas business, and Polly was helping. Little girls can do so much in the way of stoning raisins and picking out nut-meats and so forth at such times, — and boys, too, for that matter, only, if they are all like Wally, it is not very profitable to have them help much. "Just let him tend door," said Mandy. "He 'll take a great load off my back, with my hands all wet or floury. You have to go to the door just the same, no matter whether it 's a book-pedler or the emp'ror of Germany. As for me, there would n't either one of 'em get in, Christmas week. I 'd keep a dog first."

"Oh, you would n't be so hard-hearted, Mandy," said Mrs. Plummer, mixing plum-

cake such as dreams are made of. "Just think of shutting any one out who had come clear way over from Europe to see you!"

"Do n't care!" said Mandy, recklessly. "Well, anyway, if Wally *can* look after 'em" —

"Do n't want to!" whined Wally.

"He will be charmed!" laughed mamma, merrily, holding out a candied cherry which Wally gobbled without a "Thank you." "You can take your cat, dear, and see that you make him happy."

Wally's idea of making anybody happy was usually to give him something to eat; so he took a saucer of milk into the parlor, and was feeding his cat there serenely when the door-bell rang.

"It 's the Europe Lady!" he called in what he intended to be an undertone, as he opened the kitchen door a crack to report to mother and Mandy. The caller smiled and then grew thoughtful.

"It 's not such a bad title!" she said to herself, musingly. "Children like mystery, and a foreign sound to things."

"Your 'emperor,'" laughed mother, "straight from Germany!"

"What in the livin' world" — began Mandy.

"Wally means that Doctor Varney lady, that 's been in Europe so long, and has come home here to live and make pickshures. She 's his nephew or something. She 's the most beautifullest girl to play games! I like her most better than Doctor Varney."

"You!" said Mandy, staring at Polly.

"Where did you meet her?" asked mother, stopping with her hand on the door-knob. "Do you mean the young lady who entertained the little folks so beautifully at the Children's Social?"

"Yes 'm. And she told me to tell you she was coming to see you and papa about it."

So mamma went in, glad to think she had some inkling of her visitor's mission. In this, however, she was quite mistaken.

"No, no, no, my dear Mrs. Plummer!" laughed the young lady, after five or ten minutes of chat, in which the kind-hearted minister's wife had tried to meet her caller half-way, and make it easy for her to begin to sell her book or portfolio of sketches or whatever she had to get subscriptions for. "I do n't want to sell a thing! I do n't 'want your name' for anything! I just want to know if you will lend me your dear little Polly — and her cat — part of the time from now till Christmas. My uncle, Dr. Varney, heartily approves, and I am sure you will, if you will only trust me.

"You may know," she went on, seeing that her hostess still hesitated, "that my childhood was spent in Germany, Switzerland and Italy, where the games of children constitute a large part of the national

life. It occurred to me when I came home to this country that it might be a pleasant way of making an income to teach these games to little Americans, perhaps invent new ones, and try when I can to weave in the pretty folk-lore of all these lands. In the two or three large cities where I have tried it, it proved almost instantly successful, so that now I have no fear in advertising myself as a first-class Children's Entertainer!"

"You have an endorser in Polly," said Mrs. Plummer, laughing as merrily as the young lady herself at the vainglorious way in which she ended that last sentence. "She says you are 'the beautifullest girl to play games!'"

"That is just what I want to be!" cried the visitor with enthusiasm. "But I want to be something besides a worker for money — I want to help. And your little boy here gave me the very name I have

been racking my brain for. He called me 'The Europe Lady'!"

"Just the thing! But, pardon me, I can't see *now* what you want Polly for."

"O my dear Mrs. Plummer! Must I tell you? It is just a reward of merit. Do you suppose I have been a week at home without hearing about her and the little cat and all? I won't tell it all to you, but you and Mr. Plummer must know that her lovely, self-denying work with the children has set some older ones to thinking. Out of your own Christian Endeavor Society a dozen helpers have already volunteered, and this little band is connected with other associations of young women of leisure, who have agreed to devote some of their time to caring for crippled children. The work centers, of course, in the city where the large hospitals are — and in this one near by where Polly went, — but it branches out to the

homes where these little ones go after they are returned from the hospitals and are no longer under the physician's care."

"What a beautiful charity!" exclaimed her listener.

"Simply Christlike. You see then, more than ever, the poor little things need a friend, and each member of the society takes one of the children under her wing, to teach or amuse or help him in any way she can. Certain regular days are given up to it. Music and games and little talks, toys or pictures, all help to make a new world out of the dreary old one."

"How did you — they — happen to think about it?"

"Well, it came to the notice of some of us how small the force of nurses is in the children's ward of the average hospital. It is much worse, you understand, than in the others, because children must be amused as well as nursed. If not they

"HE TOOK A SAUCER OF MILK INTO THE PARLOR AND WAS FEEDING HIS CAT."

cry themselves sick, and sometimes, after an operation, the poor little things sob so when they 'come out of the ether' that it does a great deal of harm. They must be kept quiet. That is what these young girls — a good many of them still in school — have undertaken to do. They go in at meal-times, and keep the hungry little things from fretting because their turn does n't come quick enough. They sing to them and show them toys and draw funny pictures and — there! I caught your 'housekeeper's eye' glancing at the clock and I know just what time of the year it is, and just what a nuisance I must be, and — have I your promise? May I have Polly?"

"You may have any earthly thing you choose to ask for!" promised Mrs. Plummer. "I particularly want my Polly to know you."

"My uncle will drive over for her after

supper," said the "Europe Lady," bowing herself off the door-step.

Polly with a secret was like a lighted firecracker, ready to explode.

"I can't — I simply cannot — keep such a beautiful secret all to myself!" she would burst out half a dozen times a day; and the least little question made her hands fly up to her mouth, as if one tightly clasped over the other and both pressed on her lips were not by any means to be trusted to keep in the important secret.

"I am thankful it is only two days to Christmas," said Mandy, the day before Christmas Eve. "Your grandma is coming to-morrow, and" —

"Well, so am I!" burst out Polly, "for I can tell her right in her ear just what is going to happen. The Europe Lady said I might tell her all I wanted to, and won't she be pleased to see her dear little Winky

grown up into such a fine cat, and see how beautifully he will behave at the Cats' Christmas Tree and" —

"Oh! so there is to be a Christmas tree?"

"Oh, I've told! I've told!" moaned Polly in distress. "And I did n't mean to, and I do n't want to ever, ever have another secret!"

It was well that Grandma Plummer came within twenty-four hours, for Polly went round with "SECRET" written all over her, and anybody could guess it without a word spoken. Even Margery, when she jumped out in a snow-drift and ran up the back steps, asked, "What about the wonder-ball?" And, as Polly said to Georgietta, "How could she ever have known it but just 'cept by looking at me?"

Tom caught his little sister up in his arms and almost threw her over his head as he asked her how many cats were com-

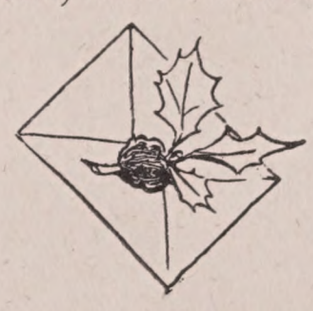
ing to the party, and father said, with a twinkle in his eye, that he guessed he could n't go because he had n't any ticket. So you may guess how well Polly had kept the secret.

And now it is time to tell you what really happened, which I hinted to you, as you will remember, in the first sentence of this chapter. It was a surprise to Polly, and it was n't. That is, she knew part of it, and helped in part of it, but there was ever so much that came without her guessing a bit of it, after they were all gathered in the doctor's big double parlors, from which Miss Lois had been coaxed to let the Europe Lady move out everything that could possibly be hurt by having fun on it.

Wally and Polly and Susie and Dorothy and Georgietta were all sent round with tiny, oddly-painted notes to the neighbors' houses a day or two before the party. The notes said: "Will you please come to the

Cats' Christmas Party?" and underneath, "Ticket, One Cat." In place of a postage-stamp in the corner was a small picture of a cat, and a sprig of holly was held securely by the drop of red sealing-wax which fastened the envelope-flap. The Europe Lady meant to be sure that her messengers delivered everything safely without dropping it.

It was a wondering crowd of children and grown folks that gathered Christmas Eve at Dr. Varney's. Not every child brought a cat, but there were enough to make it look very much like a Christmas-y sort of Cat Show. Winky was there, of course, in his best blue ribbon. Inky was there in his red. Wally's cat had been washed and combed till life was a burden to him; Dorothy and Susie had twin kittens that looked so much alike it was n't worth while giving names to them. The whole Price family was there, and every Price had his cat, and boasted of it.



The Europe Lady met them and played games with them for an hour, just as she had at the Children's Social. You will never, never know what fun "Drop the Handkerchief" is till you play it with half-a-dozen frisky cats chasing after every runner, and snatching up the handkerchief before the swiftest player has a chance to stoop for it. Winky was fairly wild. He had played these things so often at home with Polly and the others that he had not the faintest feeling of bashfulness, and all the "running parts" of the game, as Wally called them, he seemed to think were wholly for his benefit.

"He is the knowingest little creetur!" said grandma, watching from her corner, and wiping her spectacles every third minute because somehow or other she could n't see so well to-night as usual. "To think he 's only a year old, and as smart as a steel trap, if I do say it that should n't. I think

I 'll take to raising Christmas cats, if they all turn out as well as this one."

"Has she forgotten the eating part?" whispered Wally, anxiously, at last in such a loud voice that the Europe Lady heard him and smiled over to him, while she signed to Dr. Varney to call for cats and children to come to order.

"Refreshments will be" —

Well, of course they were. Nobody waited to know what else he said. You must excuse them, it being Christmas, and a cat party. Out in the back room two tables were spread, one in the usual place, and one on the floor. The cats easily guessed which theirs was. Beside each little saucer was a souvenir worth all the dinner favors ever heard of — a spicy little sachet of catnip! Winky set the example by tearing it open with teeth and claws, and the clean bare floor soon looked like Grandma Plummer's herb-garret. The chil-

dren forgot to eat their own goodies in the fun of watching this other banquet.

"Now what next?" said Wally, getting up while he could, and looking longingly at the lovely things he must leave behind him.

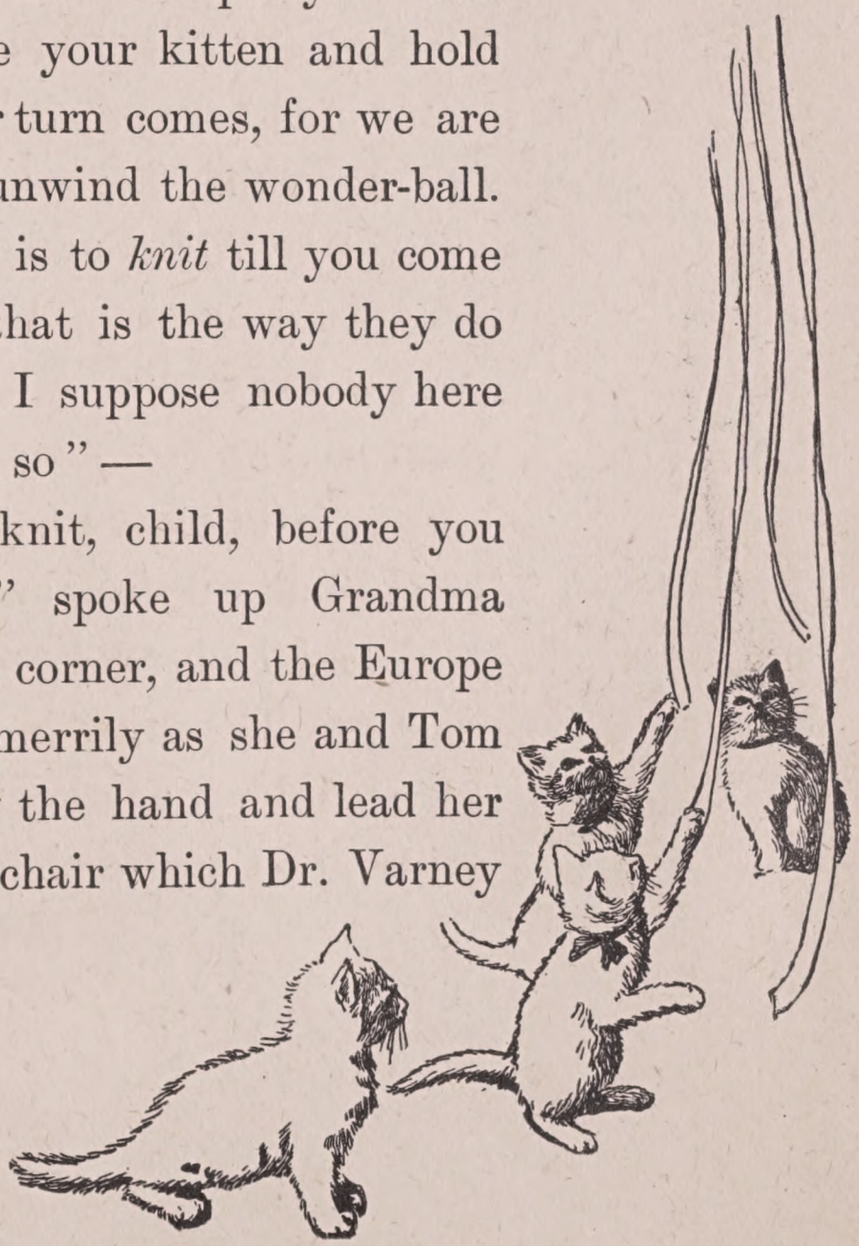
"The Christmas tree next!" said the Europe Lady brightly, leading them back to the parlor.

There in the middle was something which had not been there when they left for the supper-table. Tall and gay and drooping with its weight of presents, like any Christmas tree, but different — something was different — what was it? Winky made a dash for one of the long white fluttering strings, and then they all saw what made it look so funny. It was a cats' Christmas tree, — not a thing on it was for the children, and the gifts were only lodged ever so lightly in the branches, while long fluttering strings hung down

just within jumping reach of the excited kittens which all eyed it with sharp, bright eyes and quivering bodies. One jumped — another! In a minute the room was alive round the tree with leaping kittens, and the gay worsted balls and soft velvet mice fell every moment from the branches.

"One thing more," said the Europe Lady, "and this ends the party. You must each one take your kitten and hold him tightly till your turn comes, for we are going to begin to unwind the wonder-ball. The real right way is to *knit* till you come to your present — that is the way they do in Germany — but I suppose nobody here knows how to knit, so" —

"Why, I could knit, child, before you was thought of!" spoke up Grandma Plummer, from her corner, and the Europe Lady laughed out merrily as she and Tom ran to take her by the hand and lead her out to the big armchair which Dr. Varney



drew up in front of the round basket containing the huge, gay-colored wonder-ball. Needles were soon found, and Grandma Plummer, pleased as a child, made a fine beginning, coming in a very few minutes to her present, and no child in all that room was more pleased than the dear old lady when she saw what it was — a nice little perfumed sachet for her handkerchiefs with a white cat painted in one corner.

THE EUROPE LADY

"It 's the very livin' image of Winky," she murmured, "eyes and tail and all!"

"The rest of you will have to wind off the yarn instead of knitting it," said the Europe Lady. "Polly, you may have the first turn."

Georgietta came next, and then Dorothy, then Jimmy Price, and so on till every child had had a "turn," and every one a present. Then they began again, and kept it up as long as the presents lasted. It was the best fun of the evening.

"And all this good times and fun," said Mandy, tying Polly up in a big comforter carefully, when it was time to go home and the evening was over, "just from one little girl having a cat given her a year ago this Christmas!"

"And one thing more," said the sweet voice of the Europe Lady who had overheard her; "she had the loving wish to share her fun and her good times with others."

THE END — ME-OW!

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